



The Fate of Epic in Twentieth-Century American Poetry

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The Fate of Epic in Twentieth-Century American Poetry

A dissertation presented

by

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to

The Department of English

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The Fate of Epic in Twentieth-Century American Poetry

Abstract

This dissertation explores the afterlife of the Western epic tradition in the poetry of the United States of America after World War Two and in the wake of high modernism. The ancient, Classical conception of epic, as formulated by Aristotle, involves a crucial, integral opposition between ethos, or character, and mythos, or the defining features, narratives, and histories of the world through which ethos moves. The classical epic and its direct line of succession, from Homer to Virgil to Dante to Milton and even to Joel Barlow, uses the opposition between ethos and mythos to create literary tension and drive. In the first half of the twentieth century, however, Ezra Pound upended this tradition dynamic by attempting to create a new form of epic in which mythos, not ethos, was the principal agonist, and in which large-scale aspects of the political, literary, and economic world struggled for survival on their own terms, thus divorcing epic from its traditional reliance on ethos. Chapter One explores this dubious revolution in terms of Pound's larger project of breaking away from his nineteenth century forbears. The remaining chapters comprise three case studies of the divergent ways in which later twentieth century poets sought to salvage something of the traditional epic dynamic from the ruin wracked by Pound and his acolytes. Chapter Two explores John Berryman's *77 Dream Songs*, an epic-like poem that models itself subtly on Dante's *Commedia* while placing a profound and deliberate emphasis on ethos even at the expense of mythos. Chapter Three explores Robert Lowell's career-long effort to expose the terrifyingly inexorable nature of mythos, constructing an inconceivably enormous

presence against whom character and divinity alike struggle in vain. Finally, Chapter Four examines Adrienne Rich's early and middle years as an attempt to outline and enact a politically and socially efficacious means by which ethos might finally overcome mythos and liberate itself not only from the recursive historical traps of Pound, modernism, fascism, and patriarchy, but also from the literary history and tradition that lured humanity into believing that those traps ever existed. Berryman's intervention in the epic tradition is heavily literary and overtly personal; Lowell's is cynical, apocalyptic, and descriptively political; and Rich's is revolutionary and messianic. Together, these three poets represent a meaningful sampling of the afterlife of the epic tradition in late twentieth-century America.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	vi
Abbreviations.....	vii
Introduction: The Fate of Epic.....	1
Chapter 1: How Epic Lost Its Ethos: Pound, Browning, and the Columbiad.....	10
Chapter 2: Berryman's Dante, Dante's Virgil, and the Ascension of Ethos.....	41
Chapter 3: Robert Lowell, Mythos, and the Inexorable IS.....	105
Chapter 4: Adrienne Rich's Post-Epic Vision.....	180
Bibliography.....	213

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Abbreviations

For the reader's convenience, I have made use of abbreviated citations in the text for poems quoted from primary sources by the main authors discussed in this dissertation (Ezra Pound, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and Adrienne Rich). I hope that these citations prove unambiguous and prevent more confusion than they cause; however, I include a full list here.

Ezra Pound:

3 Cantos	"Three Cantos." Poetry 10:3 (1917), 113-121.
Personae	Personae of Ezra Pound. New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926.
Cantos	The Cantos of Ezra Pound. New York: New Directions, 1970.

John Berryman:

CP	Collected Poems 1937 – 1971. New York: Faber, Straus & Giroux, 1991.
HMB	Homage to Mistress Bradstreet. New York: Faber, Straus & Giroux, 1970.
DS##	The Dream Songs. New York: Faber, Straus & Giroux, 2007.
	N.B.: To minimize confusion, I have included the number-titles of Berryman's individual dream songs in lieu of page numbers.

Dante Alighieri:

Inf.	Inferno. Trans. Charles Singleton. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970.
Pur.	Purgatorio. Trans. Singleton. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970.
Par.	Paradiso. Trans. Singleton. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970.

Robert Lowell:

LWC	<i>Lord Weary's Castle</i>
LS	Life Studies
	N.B.: The above are collected in Collected Poems. New York: Faber, Straus & Giroux, 2003. Page numbers refer to this collected edition.
NB678	Notebook 1967 – 68. New York: Faber, Straus & Giroux, 1969.

Adrienne Rich:

CW	A Change of World
L	Leaflets
	N.B.: Page numbers from these two volumes refer to the following edition:
CEP	Collected Earlier Poems. New York: Norton, 1993.
DW	Diving into the Wreck, excerpted from The Fact of a Doorframe. New York: Norton, 1984.

Introduction: The Fate of Epic

The study you are about to read is a ghost story.

It is not a critical survey of the epic literature of the twentieth century. I am not wholly convinced that such a thing even exists, though the label is frequently applied, rightly or wrongly, to everything from the book-length poem to the encyclopedic novel. This practice is not without its uses; any set of texts to which a critic might reasonably apply the label “epic” is worthy of study in its own right, and, as always, the act of classification itself can be as critically productive as subsequent observations about the texts, their quirks, and their affinities.

This dissertation is also not a study in the rich and complicated influence of classical Greek and Latin literature on twentieth-century authors. The reception history of classical texts, especially in the heavily allusive works of the high modernism of the early twentieth century, is a fascinating and possibly inexhaustible subject on which much rich criticism has focused while leaving plenty still to be said. The following chapters say next to none of it, though, as we shall see, Berryman’s reimagining of Dante’s worldview cannot be understood without a look at Eliot’s appropriation of certain images from the *Divine Comedy*, just as post-war poets’ general turn toward the reinvigoration of character and the potency of short forms cannot be understood without a look at Pound’s determination to out-Virgil Virgil through a poetics that sought to found a new civilization of the written word rather than to recount or retell the founding of an actual civilization.

The “epic” with which I am concerned is not a direct continuation of any of these traditions. Rather, it is the afterlife of a tradition – again, if you will, a ghost. A critic examining any of the genres mentioned above may argue, perhaps rightly, that epic is living still.

Paradoxically, this does not prove that it never died. Pound's summation of the epic tradition in the Cantos was also a profoundly destructive act

What, then, is the fate of epic in the twentieth century? Now that we are securely (though perhaps not safely) into the twenty-first, we can begin to ask ourselves this question in earnest. The past fifty years of scholarship have produced many studies of great merit and significance on questions surrounding this one, such as the nature and function of the long poem during and after modernism, especially as an instrument of literary nation-building both in America and within the disparate community of international modernism; the legacy of classical Greek and Roman literature on modern poets, especially Pound and Eliot; and the twentieth-century "epic" novel, from *Buddenbrooks* and *Ulysses* onward through Pynchon to David Foster Wallace. None of these topics is the one that this dissertation addresses. The first is relevant to my first chapter as a necessary and, I hope, an interesting stepping stone toward the latter three. The second is important insofar as several of the texts we will examine rely on conventional allusion alongside the structural gestures that link them to the tradition of epic. The third, while fascinating in its own right, uses "epic" in the sense of "a literary work of epic proportions"; it has no relevance here, though the insights that it lends to studies of the modern and postmodern novel are numerous and worthwhile.

This dissertation, then, is built on the following premises:

1) That the Classical epics of Homer and Virgil share an essential structural gesture whereby *ethos*, or character, plays out its action against or within a field of *mythos*, the agentive worldview of the text. (The terms are Aristotle's; I have borrowed them not only for their satisfying consonance but also to avoid the critical baggage of terms like character, figure, persona, setting, milieu, or *Weltanschauung*. Moreover, none of these rejected terms captures

exactly what I mean by either ethos or mythos, and no two form a convenient and productive binary.) The relationship between the two is not one-sided. Mythos may affect ethos, actively or passively; in fact it must. Ethos without mythos would be a meaningless agent with no purpose or impetus; mythos without ethos, as we will see in the Cantos of Ezra Pound, is better suited to cultural manifesto than it is to memorable, engaging, and fully-rendered works of literature. The reaction between the two is the engine that drives Classical epic and its inheritors, as Achilles struggles against the gods and his own historical position, as Odysseus navigates a sea of ancient stories, as Aeneas hurtles toward the always-already-founded city of Rome, and even as Eve, Adam, and Satan struggle against the inexorable law of monotheistic divinity in *Paradise Lost*.¹

2) That a self-aware tradition of post-Classical epic exists from the Middle Ages onward, exemplified by Guillaume de Lorris, Dante, Ariosto, Spencer, Browning, etc., all of whom produced works predicated on a shared cultural understanding (Lorris's fin amour, Dante's politics and religion, Browning's vogueish antiquarianism) which gave shape and meaning to each text's mythos, allowing each to act as a translation of the structural gesture of epic into a new cultural milieu.

3) That the age of Modernism, coming hard on the heels of the age of Browning, nursed an acute distrust for shared cultural understandings and sought either to replace extant ones or to do without them entirely, an impulse that found its most profound instantiation in Ezra Pound's tacit rejection of the centrality of ethos in the epic tradition.

¹ Regarding the diverse possible applications of the term "epic," I am indebted to John McWilliams's view of the nineteenth century epic, which claims that "...we can afford no neo-Aristotelian categories of our making. We must attend to the kinds of generic transformations authors wished to achieve and we must consider the reasons for them." John McWilliams, "The Epic in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, ed. Jay Parini (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 36.

4) That the generation of poets that bloomed into literary maturity in the wake of World War Two – including Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Adrienne Rich – recognized, at least implicitly, the link between Modernism's overvaluation of mythos and the sociopolitical mechanisms of fascism. In Pound's case this was true in a quite literal sense; imprisoned for treason by the United States after the war, Pound made no attempt to hide his fascist sympathies, and indeed the agenda of his poetry, most notably the desire of the *Cantos* to create a strong, uniform, functional, well-defined, and monolithic Western culture, aligns all too well with the agenda of his politics, which explicitly supported Mussolini's fascist state and the consolidation of power among the neo-imperial governments of central Europe in the 1930s and 1940s.

5) That the reactions to this perverse twist in the epic tradition were diverse and numerous, but that Berryman, Lowell, and Rich each created a unique response to the Poundian turn, opening idiosyncratic and highly original doors that allowed the epic tradition, though thoroughly eviscerated by early twentieth-century Modernist and fascism, to live on in new and surprising vessels whose affinity with Classical epic lies in their dynamics and mechanics rather than in their form or their breadth, as each poet forges a profound statement about the relationship between ethos and mythos within an historical moment that had learned firsthand the danger of overvaluing the latter of these two elements.

This dissertation, then, is less a single narrative and more a series of case studies; chapters two through four present three distinct reactions to the cataclysm outlined in the first chapter. I trust that the links among the works studied herein will be obvious to the reader, and I have done my best to make explicit connections that may seem tenuous outside the framework of this admittedly unusual way of viewing a small corner of literary history. Moreover, there are some obvious omissions from this study; like Marianne Moore's omissions, they are not

accidents. Among these are James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*, one of the most ambitious and successful long poems of the latter half of the twentieth century; Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, which brilliantly recasts certain characters, themes, and events from Homer's *Iliad* in a late twentieth-century context. Both of these works may well be considered modern epics in their own right; as such, ironically, they would be ill suited to the attentions of this dissertation, as their anxieties about the destructive force of mythos in the early twentieth century are few, while their literary successes are many. Perhaps most profoundly absent is the remarkable work of the Beats, especially Allen Ginsberg, whose complicated relationship with the epic tradition deserves a study of its own, or at least the attention of a critic both more capacious and more patient than I am .

One more matter – unfortunately a somewhat abstruse one – should be addressed before we proceed any further. Ethos, or character, is perennially a more problematic concept in poetry than it is in prose, and we would do well to attempt to arrive at a working definition of the multitude of different things that it can be.

To begin with: every text has a human presence. In our role as readers as in our role as people, we are and will always be constant and inveterate perpetrators of a weak version of the affective fallacy. Just as we cannot see an oncoming car without feeling sympathetic tingings of some emotion that the particular arrangement of its headlights and grille seem to convey, we cannot experience arranged words without positing some psychological agent with which to associate them. A text might invite or impede this positing, by explicitly constructing an interdiegetic narrator, perhaps, or by retreating to the feigned anonymity and angularity of the avant-garde, but none can banish it completely. The reader is a slave to ghosts: ghosts of the author (one hears Whitman), ghosts of the culture in which the text originated (one hears 19th

century American men in uniforms and workshirts), or ghosts of the cultures that afterwards embraced the text (one hears Ginsberg's Whitman, or Guthrie's). We could only experience a text as truly impersonal if we had no knowledge of it whatsoever, a state of ignorance that would collapse as soon as we read it.

All poetry, lyrics or narrative, invites a distinction between speaker and not-speaker, the human presence that is the efficient cause of the words and the human presences of which the words are the efficient cause. If one or the other is absent, its presence can still be easily imagined, even if this thought experiment wreaks havoc on the artwork. Likewise, a text that appears to contain a single human presence has the power to violently split that human presence into a speaker and a non-speaker. Consider the simple case of Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening," a one-person poem apparently grounded in the present tense, inviting the reader to experience the illusion of watching events unfold in real time. Undoubtedly there is an "I" who is "stopping here / To watch his woods fill up with snow". We believe, we know, that this "I" really is in the forest, and really does have miles to go before he sleeps. We suspend our disbelief as willingly as we would for any Pip or Karenina. But there is another "I" lurking behind the first one who, although coterminous within the rhetoric of the poem, shares little with the first "I" other than the name. This second "I" is the great conjurer, the implied author, the maker of words, the agent who is not in the woods but at a desk, perhaps, or behind a lectern at the Library of Congress, or even a disembodied voice stuck into the pages of our book, spectral but human nonetheless.

The deployment of character in the novel has some useful overlap with the deployment of character in poetry, although direct parallels are often thwarted by the important distinction between the novel as a normatively narrative form and poetry, at least in the 20th century, as a

normatively lyric form. While the novel can never quite dodge away from the implication of a conscious narrator, poetry can never quite escape from the shaping hand or voice that creates the reality underlying a text. A narrator may securely pose as the shaper of a tale, as the creator of its words and to some extent even as the agent behind its actions, but creation *ex nihilo* is beyond the scope of its powers. The most self-aware of narrators may make terrible things happen to the heroine, but the heroine herself is no more the created product of the narrator than the narrator is the created product of itself. Both share a thoroughly extra-textual creator: the author, the real flesh-and-blood one, no matter how dead she or he may be. This is precisely what is “fictive” about fiction. Regardless of the complex network of agency established amongst textual figures, we read them all as creations.

David Woloch in *The One vs. the Many* offers an insightful distinction between the human reality of characters in the novel and the character-spaces that surround them like gravitational distortions in textual spacetime: “[T]he character system offers not simply many interacting individuals but many intersecting character-spaces, each of which encompasses an embedded interaction between the discretely implied person and the dynamically elaborated narrative form.”² If we were to try to apply this model to poetry, we would find that it worked only in those cases of traditional narrative verse in which the structure of plot and character in the text are nearly indistinguishable from those same structures in the novel. But we can modify the argument slightly to fit the particular needs of lyric-normative poetry. At the heart of Woloch’s argument lies the assumption that what appears to be a single textual figure – a character in a novel – can, in fact, be read as the surface manifestation of two separate though related entities in the deep structure of the text. In the case of the novel, those entities are

² Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 17-18.

character and what Woloch calls character-space, belonging respectively to personal and to structural interactions between textual figures. Not much poetry of the modern lyric-normative tradition involves interaction between characters, but we could make a similar distinction between a) the posited player in the text's immediate drama and b) the posited agent behind that situation's very existence, as mentioned above. The basic idea of concealed duality is the same in both poetry and the novel.

But why should we go through the effort of reading poetry as so different from fiction? Both are made textual objects, surely, and we are well aware that both are entirely the products of actual authors. To the stodgy literalist reader, perhaps there is no distinction to be made here. But the pragmatist reader will object that within our literary / cultural community, the distinctions are very great indeed.

Allen Grossman's influential treatise *Summa Lyrica* describes the act of reading a poem as the fulfillment of both the reader's and the poem's "destiny" as the two intermingled to actualize, perhaps even to create, a "human presence" that lies dormant in the text whenever the text is not undergoing the transformative process that is reading. The "human presence" thus manifested is the locus of the poet's "immortality," a sort of perpetual reanimation of the writing artist through the creative power of the reading artist.³ The very fact that we can comprehend such an argument, regardless of the extent to which we believe it, reveals something crucial about the way we as a reading society conceive of lyric poetry. The act of reading is always, without fail, one in a theoretically infinite set of actualizations of the potential that the poem itself represents. Because the psychic states that lyric poetry represents are not countable entities the way that, say, events in a novel are, the iteration of the poem in a single instance of reading

³ Allen Grossman, *The Sighted Singer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992), 213-214.

does not exhaust the reality-potential of the text as the reading of a novel might. It is absurd to reread the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and say, “Yes, but it only happened once.” The poem announces: I have been before and I will be again; I am a template for repetition and you, dear reader, are not my first time. Except the question of “time” becomes meaningless when we consider that multiple readings of a poem do not bear a serial relation to one another. True, our understanding of the text deepens with each reading, and we may feel that we are progressing, though perhaps not linearly, from a state of confusion to a perfect understanding of the poem’s “message.” But consider the analogous act of re-reading a novel. Assuming that the reader has more or less grasped the essential aspects of text the first time around, the overarching experience is one of watching events unfold that have already occurred. There is an unbridgeable gulf between the first reading, in which the reader half believes that the whole plot is occurring in the present, and all subsequent readings, in which the reader is merely reminded of something that she knows has already occurred.

Whatever conjuring occurs when the reader reads a poem, then, occurs again and again, possibly afresh each time. This is precisely what makes ethos such an essential feature of epic. As a sort of hybrid, a halfway form (at least to the modern reader) blending aspects of lyric poetry with aspects of narrative, epic has the potential not only to hold a number of characters comparable to the capacity of a novel, but also to allow for their perpetual rebirth in a way that the novel cannot.

Chapter 1: How Epic Lost Its Ethos: Pound, Browning, and the Columbiad

We could do far worse than to begin a study of the afterlife of epic with Edgar Allan Poe, who never wrote one. Though more often read today for his prematurely post-romantic poetry⁴ and his startlingly original, if hazardously autochthonous prose fiction,⁵ Poe was one of the best respected literary critics of mid-19th century America, a self-assured giant in a literary culture still barely emerging from the anxieties of its infancy, a covert nation-builder in a generation whose grandparents still remembered America the backwater colony and America the struggling young republic. Born just before the War of 1812, during which the United States first asserted itself as a significant player on the global stage, and dead just months after the end of James K. Polk's presidency, which spanned the Texas Annexation of 1845, the Oregon Treaty of 1846, and the Mexican Cession of 1848, Poe lived through the most rapid period of territorial expansion in the nation's history.

Not all of Poe's critical adages have stood the test of time, and with perfect hindsight we might fault him for some of his self-serving declarations about the function and requirements of poetry ("[T]he manifestation of the [Poetic] Principle is always found in an elevating excitement

⁴ A dubious claim, perhaps not worth defending at length here – but the formal and conventional self-consciousness of lyrics such as "To Helen," "Annabel Lee," and perhaps even "The Raven" betrays Poe's meta-literary attitude toward the conventions of his own era just as powerfully as any of his expository manifestos.

⁵ Though many of his tales are deeply and conspicuously indebted to the gothic tradition, others, such as the stories centered around the investigative processes of detective C. Auguste Dupin, remind us that Poe was willing occasionally to abnegate many of the assumptions of the literary tradition in order to strike out in experimental new directions. He is by no means alone in this – the same can certainly be said for Hawthorne and Melville, for instance – but it is important to remember in contemplating his attitude toward the epic tradition.

of the Soul,”⁶ for one – emphasis Poe’s, of course) as well his penchant for marginally evocative romantic platitudes (“the suggestive odour that comes to him, at eventide, from far-distant, undiscovered islands, over dim oceans, illimitable and unexplored”⁷). But while Poe overreaches as a theorist of pure poetics, his broader insights into the cultural life of mid-nineteenth-century America offer a perspicacious record of a nation rapidly advancing toward a sort of self-defined and self-fulfilling greatness. Without descending into fanciful speculation about which sociopolitical conditions are most apt to produce which types of literature, still we can note that Poe’s world was one in which the question of nation-building was absolutely unavoidable to the educated and literate populace.

In his well-known essay “The Poetic Principle,” published posthumously in 1850, Poe spends nearly as much time spouting invective against the sins of his literary era as he does outlining the alleged precepts of good verse. A principal object of his wrath is what he calls “the epic mania. . .the idea that, to merit in posterity, prolixity is indispensable.” Though Poe claims that this fad has nearly run its course “by mere dint of its own absurdity,” still it has done lasting damage to American letters.⁸ Cheap imitators of Homer have been marring a nascent literary tradition in a misconstrued effort to ensure their own immortality. Worse still, what they have been producing is not even poetry: according to Poe: “a long poem does not exist,” suggesting

⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Poetic Principle,” in *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 92-93.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 75.

that Milton and even Homer were essentially writing long lyric sequences held together by meretricious filler.⁹

Poe's assessment of the inherent potential of epic may be as flawed as his denial of its existence, but his twin assertions that "epic mania" has plagued the national literature for some decades and that it is now (in 1849) finally "dying out of the public mind"¹⁰ still ring true to the scholar of that era. The early 19th century was the period that produced Joel Barlow's *Columbiad* (which Poe finds sufficiently heinous to attack by name) and a dozen less-well-remembered efforts of similar gravitas and bathos – long poems that attempt to tell the story of America's founding in a manner meant to rival Virgil's Roman creation myth – whereas by mid-century the trend was indeed beginning to draw to a close as the culture shifted toward a milieu that would allow for the runaway success of less overtly historical and political works such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's forays into myth and legend, while at the same time the self-assurance of Manifest Destiny gave way to a second wave of national anxiety as the country began to plummet toward civil war. Neither circumstance lent itself well to the creation of epic tales of America in the style of Virgil.

Yet Poe could not have known that the close of "epic mania" would only be a temporary one. The fashion for epic, like most other trend in a culture's poetics, is one that periodically

⁹ "In regard to the *Iliad*, we have, if not positive proof, at least very good reason for believing it intended as a series of lyrics; but, granting the epic intention, I can say only that the work is based in an imperfect sense of art. The modern epic is, of the supposititious ancient model, but an inconsiderate and blindfold imitation. But the day of these artistic anomalies is over. If, at any time, any very long poem were popular in reality, which I doubt, it is at least clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again." *Ibid.*, 71. Note also the similarities between this assertion and the much more nuanced views of Adorno and Horkheimer a century later in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which we will explore in greater detail in Chapter 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

waxes and wanes, as it has several times between the birth of American literature and the present day. What Poe believed to be the imminent death of a form he loathed was merely its temporary retreat into the foxholes of the unfashionable. Worse still, from another perspective there was no retreat, no waning at all: as Poe himself ironically demonstrates, the localized mid-nineteenth-century “dying out” of the fashion for writing the Epic was counterbalanced by a resilient urge to theorize it, to contemplate its failure and impossibility as loudly as another age might contemplate its artfulness and sublimity. To loathe epic is not to be free from its influence.

The tension between these two poles has kept Epic alive in American literature even in times when its usefulness has come under the very sort of severe criticism that we see in Poe’s “The Poetic Principle.” In fact, one might claim that we have grown increasingly fascinated by the idea of epic the further our normative literature gets from the paradigms of Homer and Virgil. Those times in which epics have been declared impossible to create are also times in which they have been meticulously theorized, and the voice of the naysayers has always been, if not exactly drowned out, then at least quietly supplemented by a handful or more of writers trying to translate the form, or at least some essential gesture of the form (be it length, archetypal awareness, or social import), into some version of a contemporary idiom.

The rest of this chapter will deal with two such moments of crisis in the American understanding of epic: first, Barlow’s *Columbiad* (1807), which, as we have seen, is a prime example of the sort of “epic mania” that Poe bemoaned in his own era – true, the poem had been in print for over forty years at the time Poe wrote *The Poetic Principle*, but this gap is no stranger than a critic complaining about Hemingway in the 1960s – and, second, Ezra Pound’s concerted effort, over two centuries after Barlow, to forge a new breed of epic that amalgamated the high cultural traditions of Europe, America, and the Far East in an attempt to resurrect the alleged

political and artistic strength of an imaginary golden age. In doing so, as we shall see, Pound significantly devalued the traditional role that ethos, or character, plays in epic, displacing the Aristotelian structure of ethos-struggling-against-a-backdrop-of-mythos in favor of a strangely recursive dynamic in which mythos itself becomes the principal struggling agent as culture fights for its own survival, a substitution that is foreshadowed in Pound's systematic evisceration of the role of character in the dramatic monologues that define his early verse and anticipate the greater departures and innovations of the Cantos, the open-ended, agglutinative epic that consumed the latter stage of Pound's career and which he would not live to complete.

Barlow's Columbiad and Early American Epic

Before we get into the particulars of the Poundian revolt against character, we should consider the normative life of the epic in American literature prior to Modernism. Joel Barlow's *Columbiad* (1807), though somewhat neglected in our present critical era, is one of America's earliest epics and one of the more self-consciously constructed examples of the genre, a poem that is constantly aware of its own literary lineage as well as its own sociopolitical purpose. In spite of the author's transparent intentions to create a poem of Classical import and elegance based on an incident in the life of Christopher Columbus—America's Aeneas, perhaps?—Barlow in his 1809 Preface to the work raises doubts as to whether his poem is really worthy of inclusion in the tradition of Homer and Virgil. On a note of self-doubt that sounds reasonably ingenuous, Barlow contends: "The *Columbiad* is a patriotic poem; the subject is national and historical. Thus far it must be interesting to my countrymen. But most of the events were so recent, so important and so well known, as to render them inflexible to the hand of fiction."¹¹

¹¹ Joel Barlow, *The Columbiad: A Poem* (London: Richard Phillips, 1809), iii.

Barlow wants his reader to know that this is perhaps not an Epic in the true sense, thus raising the question of what “the true sense” really is. It seems, according to Barlow’s preface, to have something to do with transformation and embellishment, the processes of subjecting history to the sorts of transformations that turn it into art. The *Iliad*, after all, does not consist of uncompromising historical truth, and Barlow recognizes that the myths of the young American republic—even the myth of Columbus, a full three hundred years distant—may be too tainted by record-keeping and hard historical fact to effectively constitute the material of true post-classical epic. Here we also see a trace of the familiar anxiety of America’s fledgling literary culture, still a decade or so before the dawn of Washington Irving’s public success¹² and the effective birth of a self-assured American literary prose tradition.

Yet Barlow’s argument seems to shift and undermine itself in the next passage: “The poem therefore could not with propriety be modeled after that regular epic form which the more splendid works of this kind have taken, and on which their success is supposed in a great measure to depend. The attempt would have been highly injudicious; it must have diminished and debased a series of actions which were really great in themselves, and could not be disfigured without losing their interest.”¹³ Perhaps Barlow, who was, after all, also the author of the great American mock-epic “Hasty Pudding,”¹⁴ intends at least a trace of irony when he speaks of “propriety” and the qualities on which success “is supposed to depend.” By claiming

¹² Here I am counting to the 1819 publication of the first installment of *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, by no means the undeniable birth date of a truly American literary tradition but a fairly good metric nonetheless.

¹³ Barlow, iii.

¹⁴ A spirited celebration of cornmeal mush, which Barlow compares favorably to most other maize-based dishes – a must-read for connoisseurs of culinary literature.

that his principal aim in leaving his work unembellished is to preserve matters “really great in themselves,” might Barlow be suggesting that his own subject is, in fact, of greater historical import, and thus literary import, than the Trojan War and its aftermath? If so, then we might question all of Barlow’s humble rhetoric and take license to read his Preface not as a declaration of humbleness but rather as an assertion that he is, if not the new Virgil, than at least the new Milton, dealing with “things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.”

It is not entirely clear, however, to what extent Barlow wants to be identified with the Classical writers of epic, whom he views with a purely artistic reverence. Homer, he implies, more or less ruined Western civilization with his glorification of war and despotism, and Virgil was not much better, a propagandist for a fundamentally tyrannical State. The political aims of epic, according to Barlow’s Preface, should be to feed the republican mind and to foster a sense of citizenship and morality in its readers, a feat which no Classical author accomplished.¹⁵

If this is true, then why write an epic at all? Perhaps a secular version of the Miltonic urge drove Barlow to attempt to redeem the Classical tradition from its (politically) Pagan roots, which would certainly be in keeping with his own statements about the social aims of his own work. But we can also read his affinity for the epic form as a matter of pure artistry. After a little boasting about his own strict obedience to the Classical Unities, the Preface goes on to suggest that what matters far more than the technical aspects of an epic is its overall artistic merit:

Its merit must depend on the importance of the action, the disposition of the parts, the invention and application of incidents, the propriety of the illustrations, the liveliness and chastity of the images, the suitable intervention of machinery, the moral tendency of the manners, the strength and sublimity of the sentiments; the

¹⁵ Barlow suggests that Lucan may be the one exception, but considers his works too much of an artistic train wreck to really count. Barlow, vii.

whole being clothed in language whose energy, harmony and elegance shall constitute a style every where suited to the matter they have to treat.¹⁶

At first this appears to be a dauntingly inclusive catalogue. If all this is needed to make a true epic, is there a single thing without which a work would cease to deserve the label, a *sine qua non* of the genre as a whole? Barlow's qualitative understanding of the form does not suggest, for instance, that a poem with lively images but no "chaste" ones would somehow not pass muster. Rather, each and every one of these qualities is related insofar as they are part of a common tapestry of dramatic form. To Barlow, the essential gesture of epic, aside from a few throwaway truisms like "elegance," is essentially dialectical: from "importance of action" to "intervention of machinery" and "moral tendency," Barlow conceives of epic as a text in which parts play against a whole, incidents interrupt circumstance, and meaning emerges from human action rather than from, say, the meditative subjectivity of lyric.

As well as Barlow formulates these ideas, they have been common to Western literary thought at least since Aristotle.¹⁷ Barlow's importance lies in his reformulation of the material to suit a new era and worldview, a tendency that continues among American poets to the present day and probably will well beyond. As recently as 1809, then—which, with Homer's ghost in the room, is quite recent—an understanding still existed that character and action were the essential lifeblood of epic. Trying to imagine a poem that contains neither yet still fulfills Barlow's artistic criteria is a difficult feat. Again, "Character" is, in this sense, the equivalent of what Aristotle originally meant by the word *ethos* when used with respect to literature: the particularities of an

¹⁶ Ibid., iv.

¹⁷ The scarcity written evidence of pre-Socratic philosophy sadly leaves us to wonder how many of Aristotle's ideas were original with the man himself and how many were the inherited wisdom and cultural assumptions of the era.

individual or of a group of individuals, the properties that govern their reactions to and interactions with their environment. (The short leap from this concept to moral analysis gives us the more common meaning of the word today.) The environment itself, the backdrop that catalyzes or spurs the actions of character, is the more familiar mythos. The action of drama, and, by extension, the drama of Epic, can be understood to flow from the interaction between the two. In other words, Epic must have character – must have ethos – in order to function.

But Barlow's "epic," crucially, is missing an element that we are used to thinking of as essential to the formulation of the epic. McWilliams points out that the poem is not as strictly narrative in its form as one might expect from a traditional, Classical epic – rather it is "a gigantic expansion of the eighteenth-century Prospect Poem, as adapted by Barlow's generation to celebrate the Rising Glory of America."¹⁸ The important point here is that even early attempts to forge an American national epic exposed their own literary paradigms and precursors to transformation through substitution and sublation of formerly indispensable elements. We should not be surprised that these changes occurred early in the history of American poetry: Barlow's removal of narrative drive from the form of the Epic is no more radical than, say, Milton's substitution of the idea of religious redemption for the individual or social triumph of the Classical hero. What is remarkable is that the work was, and still is, instantly recognizable as an attempt to construct a "modern" epic in a world far removed from epic's original domain.

Early Pound

Of course, our own literary era neither basks in the sun nor withers in the shade of Barlow's; though it bears traces, often self-conscious ones, of America's oldest cultural

¹⁸ John P. McWilliams, *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre, 1770-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 39.

traditions,¹⁹ our current literary milieu has traveled far through the complex ecosystems of romanticism, transcendentalism, and modernism before even reaching the postmodern era that the remaining chapters of this dissertation will discuss. Moreover, the literary world having participated in a globalized cultural economy from the start, we must remember that the influences on our current order of things were by no means solely American; those most involved in transforming our native understanding of the form of epic often had as much commerce with European traditions, old and new, as they did with homegrown American cultural objects.

Foremost among the transforming agents of epic in the 20th century was Ezra Pound, who forever changed the form and function of American epic with his lengthy and ultimately unfinished work the *Cantos*, and yet sought to construct a fresh normative culture that was as much a European revival and a global reordering as it was an American assertion of national presence.²⁰ The principal travesty of Pound's oeuvre, and the ultimate source of the damage it would wreak on the Western literary tradition, is the idea that some cultural weakness exists that must be overcome in order for capital-L Literature and capital-K "Kulchur"²¹ to move forward and assume their role as part of a new world order (disguised, of course, as a resurgence of the

¹⁹ Here I am thinking of the self-aware, quasi-anachronistic, paratactic and conspicuously biblical prose of authors such as Cormac McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* (1985) and, more recently, Marilynne Robinson in *Gilead* (2004).

²⁰ For those less familiar with the *Cantos*, the work includes vast passages drawing on Italian Renaissance history, Chinese philosophy, and the writings on John Adams. Yet we would be hard pressed to call the *Cantos* a cosmopolitan work in any meaningful sense of the word; its goal is not to amalgamate but to appropriate, plucking salvageable relics from what Pound sees as the ruins of civilization in order to forge a new, better, and presumably monolithic order – Fascism by any other name.

²¹ A coy coinage of Pound's, from the title of his 1938 work *Guide to Kulchur*. Note how the form of the word perfectly unites folksy ingenuousness with hyper-Germanic Aryan posturing.

old world order, just as Mussolini fashioned himself as just another Roman emperor). In order to make his mark – because the rebellion of the poet, typically, was as much personal as societal – Pound had to find a way to break free from the inherited structures of his late nineteenth century forbears while also furthering his literary-political agenda of cultural revival. The rest of this chapter argues that Pound did this by deliberately subverting the traditional role of ethos, or character, first through his variations on the dynamics of the late Romantic dramatic monologue, and later, more significantly, through his evisceration of ethos from the traditional dynamics of epic when he began the Cantos. In this later great work, Pound creates a sort of epic in which mythos is both the protagonist and the antagonist, struggling against itself in a recursive loop that leaves little room for escape from or advancement of the form.²²

At first glance, Pound's early work seems replete with a host of conscious subjects, surrogate minds animated by verse. From Nikoptis's soul in "The Tomb at Akr Çaar,"

And no sun comes to rest me in this place,
And I am torn against the jagged dark,
And no light beats upon me, and you say
No word, day after day. . .

(Personae, 60)

to the River Merchant's Wife in Cathay,

The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me. I grow older. . .

(Personae, 130)

²² We might think of Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems* (1953-1970) as the ultimate object lesson in the limitations of the Poundian epic tradition when carried forward. Olson's epic imagines takes the history, politics, and culture of the city of Gloucester, Massachusetts and treats it as a character in its own right, leaving little room for the necessary human tension that gave classical epic (and even later, pre-modernist imitations such as Barlow's *Columbiad*, pale though many were) its enduring charm.

these personae can think, feel, even mourn and grieve.²³ They are every bit as human and real as the drifting ego of Wordsworth or the *dramatis personae* of Longfellow's narrative poems. Yet they break with the traditions of nineteenth century poetic subjectivity in several subtle and unsettling ways. First, they reject the role of the "lyric I" as an avatar of the poet himself; they exist in a mode that is poetic in the literal sense of the word – involved in making, *poesis* – rather than reflective of a posited reality whose existence we are invited to infer and to experience for ourselves. In their fictive nature they are fundamentally un-Wordsworthian, projecting an admittedly imagined ego into an imagined world. What emerges is a double-fiction: the possibility of lyric as overheard internal contemplation is thwarted by the explicit otherness of the experiential subject. Such a dynamic is common in fiction and in narrative verse, but it is fundamentally alien to the genre of personal lyric.

Second, their affinity with the tradition of extended narrative verse is productively complex, but ultimately self-effacing. Pound gestures toward narrative, often intimating the skeleton of a tale within a poetic structure too narrow to contain anything other than the rudiments of the narrative. Significantly, allusion plays a relatively minor role in this early work: the reader who knows a thing or two about medieval Occitan history²⁴ may be able to supply contextual details that are absent from "Sestina: Altaforte," but lines such as these speak for themselves:

²³ So thorough was Pound's fascination with the idea of the persona that he named his early-career collected volume *Personae* (1909).

²⁴ This reader shall here confess his prior ignorance of medieval Occitan history – and can thus assure you, dear reader, that researching the historical background to the events described in "Sestina: Altaforte" sheds no more light on Pound's poem than reading Frazer's *The Golden Bough* cover-to-cover sheds on Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

In hot summer have I great rejoicing
When the tempests kill the earth's foul peace,
And the lightnings from black heav'n flash crimson,
And the fierce thunders roar me their music
And the winds shriek through the clouds mad, opposing,
And through all the riven skies God's swords clash.

(Personae, 28)

It is enough to be aware of the existence of a narrative somewhere in the imagined space behind the text itself. War, bloodlust, and destruction are treated categorically in the poem. Simply knowing that literal instantiations of these concepts do stand behind the intimations present in this metaphorical language allows the reader to experience the full effects of the verse, which are largely metrical, rhetorical, and aural. Of course, Pound's later verse entirely re-imagines its relationship with allusion, creating the opaque textures of the Cantos which, unlike the poet's earlier work, rely heavily on specific extra-textual allusions without which even the surface meaning of the text remains inscrutable. The early lyrics, though, are self-sufficient microcosms of stories that the reader is not necessarily impelled to know in full. The best example, or perhaps the absurd hyperextension, of this resistance to the compulsion toward completion is the absurdly short piece from *Lustra* called "Papyrus." To quote in full:

Spring
Too long
Gongula

On the surface, the poem is a simple textual joke or a slightly more complex deconstruction of the idea of completeness and authenticity, an imitation not of Sappho's actual poetic style but of the fragmentary form in which many such texts survived into the modern era. We certainly do not need to know who Gongula was in order to appreciate the gesture or, for that matter, the remnant of the poem. Pound's treatment implies that the appearance of an artifact is itself worth imitating, just as Gothic sculpture, once painted brilliant colors, exists in our cultural imagination

only in stark grays. But we can, if we wish, read a more general meaning into this strangely specific poetic gesture: this tantalizing demi-lyric suggests that the comprehension of a text – the containment and absorption of everything within the perimeter of its signification – does not have to depend on anything outside of the text itself. This is not unusual in the history of the lyric, but it does have peculiar implications for a poetic idiom that has strong affinities with narrative, as Pound’s dramatic monologues and his later epic the *Cantos* certainly do: historically, most narrative poetry exists either in fictive self-containment or in dialogue with an external literary tradition. Pound’s unpolished nuggets of narrative verse do neither, challenging any impulse we might have to read them as an uncomplicated extension of the nineteenth century narrative tradition.

The specific tradition with which these early Poundian lyrics have most in common is that of Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues, though, as we will see soon see, Pound’s poems downplay the role of ethos in the dramatic monologue much in the same way that he would downplay the role of ethos in epic later in his career. It is well known that Pound had a longstanding fascination with and admiration for Browning; he went so far as to claim that the dramatic monologue was “the most vital form of [the Victorian] period,”²⁵ and his Bloomian struggle with Browning’s powerful and welcome influence is laid bare in the opening lines of Canto II:

Hang it all, Robert Browning,
There can be but the one Sordello.
But Sordello, and my Sordello?

(*Cantos*, 6)

The similarities between the two poets are well established and it would be foolish to ignore them altogether. After all, much of Pound’s early work does exhibit at least some of what are

²⁵ Quoted in Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (New York: Norton, 1957), 77.

usually considered the key features of the dramatic monologue: a speaker, a listener, and a dramatic situation that involves an interaction between the two.²⁶ It is the last criterion, however, that is most often absent from Pound's evocations of the form: Nikoptis's soul bounces about its tomb but has no real commerce with its dead former host; the River Merchant may receive his wife's letter sometime in the future, but not within the confines of the poem itself. None of this is in the least bit damning, since we would expect a 20th-century adaptation of a 19th-century form to exhibit some meaningful mutation, most likely one involving a loosening of formal conventions (cp. the evolution of the sonnet). Yet the dramatic monologue is still an insufficient model for understanding Pound's early lyrics, for reasons having less to do with form and more to do with readerly experience. For Robert Langbaum, the key experiential feature of the dramatic monologue is its extreme suitability to making conditionally-bound value judgments:

“... [J]udgment is largely psychological and historicized. We adopt a man's point of view and the point of view of his age in order to judge him—which makes the judgment relative, limited in applicability to the particular conditions of the case. This is the kind of judgment we get in the dramatic monologue, which is for this reason an appropriate form for an empiricist and relativist age. . . .”²⁷

Indeed, as Langbaum also points out, a large part of the criticism devoted to Browning's dramatic monologues is concerned with determining whether Browning is “for” or “against” certain subjects of his poems.²⁸ In the case of Pound, however, it is almost impossible to imagine the poet attempting to embed such judgments in his poems, let alone for the reader to discern them. Part of this stems from the intrinsic otherness of many of Pound's subjects. His numerous translations from Occitan, Chinese, and even Anglo-Saxon not only undermine the idea of

²⁶ Ibid., 76.

²⁷ Ibid., 107.

²⁸ Ibid., 106.

authorship and originality,²⁹ but also serve to distance the reader from the speaking subject. True, many of Browning's subjects are just as exotic as Pound's, but Browning counterbalances this centrifugal drive by deliberately cultivating intimacy between his subjects and his readers, thus creating highly psychologized figures to whom the reader can have a deep emotional response with its roots in empirical observations of an imagined scene. Pound, on the other hand, allows the estranging otherness of his personae to exist on its own terms. Formal features of verse and image leap to the forefront while questions of human psychology – a necessary factor for the sort of readerly judgment that must accompany the dramatic monologue – drift to the rear.

It is also crucial to consider the literary-historical factors which make Pound's use of the dramatic monologue in the first two decades of the twentieth century mean something altogether different than Browning's use of a similar lyrical mode in the mid-1800s. Browning's own reputation was hardly secure through most of his literary career. The immense fame for which he is largely remembered, though it began to creep up on him with the publication of *Men and Women* in 1855, did not firmly establish itself until around the time of *The Ring and the Book* (1869). Even then he was merely a well-respected and relatively successful English poet. Cultic devotion to his oeuvre did not begin until the establishment of the first Browning Societies in the 1880s.³⁰ By that time, the poet himself had largely moved on from the innovative lyrical

²⁹ As originally published, many of Pound's translations do not even announce themselves as such. This is less an attempt at plagiarism – Pound's ideal reader, of course, could never be fooled – and more an attempt to let the texts speak on their own terms, independent of authorial and historical ownership. Compare this approach with Amy Lowell's *Fir Flower Tablets* (1921), which includes a lengthy introduction about the formal features and historical context of Chinese poetry.

³⁰ Boyd Litzinger and Donald Smalley, *Browning: The Critical Heritage*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 12-25.

dynamics that characterized his earlier poetry. His later verse is thick with the distance of contemplation and cogitation, a mode which, while reasonably well received at the time, is not the one for which he is best remembered. The dramatic monologues on which his posthumous reputation largely rests were written at a time when his living reputation was far from secure. They were risky experiments, innovative forays against a somewhat hostile or at least apathetic public, and, most importantly, somewhat out of step with the mores of an era that deified Tennyson's reification of the aesthetic and spawned the Pre-Raphaelites.

By the time Browning the Literary Hero had been created, though – the peak of his fame was in the decades immediately following his death – the form didn't seem so risky at all. In fact, the dramatic monologue was the perfect literary correlate for the Browning that the world wanted to remember – the lover, the sage, the larger-than-life character who became an object of obsessive literary tourism to rival even Dickens.³¹ Interest in the man's poetry was hardly less widespread than interest in the man himself. In the early years of the Great War, when tolerance for the Victorians was already rapidly waning, William Lyon Phelps published a book of lay criticism called *Browning: How to Know Him*.³² The title and the method which it describes are by no means out of the ordinary in the age preceding the New Criticism, but it is crucial to remember that this was the spirit in which Browning was remembered in the years during which Pound began writing his early works. The method which Browning imposes on his characters in his dramatic monologues – the attention to messy detail and minutiae, the implicit attempt to reveal or discover coherent moral positions through the observation of actions, the constant presence of a presumed actual psychology underlying the artistic surface of the work – was

³¹ Patricia O'Neill, *Robert Browning and Twentieth-Century Criticism* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1995), 20-21.

³² *Ibid.*, 21.

applied to the idea of Browning himself, as though his life, now neatly concluded, had become a literary object. By the time Pound approached the form in the early twentieth century, it had become both normalized and estranged, occupying an ambiguous cultural space that Pound was able easily to exploit to create a poetics of monologue that resembles Browning's closely while meaning something altogether different. Pound's personae are their own makers, and even when they have direct historical referents, their real life is on the page, as verse-objects.

We see, then, that three promising types of literary precedent – Romantic lyric, Victorian narrative, and dramatic monologue – are all insufficient to explain what is going on in some of Pound's early lyrics. Yet, frustratingly, the poems do share affinities with all three literary topoi. The best way out of this paradox, then, may be to say that Pound is committing a bold gesture of apophatic genre identification, wherein the myriad conventions of an entire era are put under erasure by a poetic form that generates novelty out of precedent rather than by opposing it. Older conventions are swept up and absorbed, soon to be sublated into the emerging tangle of Modernism. The most crucial aspect of this act of erasure, however, is that all the topoi with which Pound's early lyrics are interacting involve, as we have seen, some form of poetic subjectivity, whether it be the I of lyric, the s/he of narrative, or the you of dramatic monologue. Each possible form of personhood is dismissed in Pound's poetics, yet the ghost of each is retained, creating a poetry that intimates but does not embody the strong personal subjects whom we expect to fill an imagined world, the ethos that, by Aristotelian convention, should be playing against the backdrop of mythos as lyric shifts toward epic. In early Pound this gap is itself only half-present, uncannily filled by the echoes of effaced poetic conventions. In the shift to the Cantos, though, the gap widens, creating the void that will ultimately be filled by mythos, leading to the self-referential structure of mythos-struggling-against-mythos that characterizes

the later Poundian tradition and that provided the new normative fate of twentieth century epic that writers such as John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and Adrienne Rich would all, in their own particular idioms, push back against.

Later Pound: Cantos

Pound's Cantos are a baffling work, but the opacity of their erudition and their allusive texture are not the primary source of confusion for the reader who approaches them with an open mind. As we will see, the formal, narrative, and characterological ambiguities of the work are more productively complex, and more important for the reader to unravel, than the aspects of the work which make it seem more obviously "difficult." In the nineteenth century, Robert Browning expressed bewilderment at the literary world's bewilderment at his famously opaque long poem *Sordello*. You don't have to know the nuances of thirteenth-century Italian politics, Browning believed – everything you need is in the poem.³³ Pound himself said of Homer that a skilled reader could almost get "all of it" – meaning all the art of poetry – in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, suggesting that this was because "I have never read half a page of Homer without finding melodic invention . . . that I didn't already know" – a strong if implicit argument for a strong reading of poetry at the surface level.³⁴ Though of course one could argue that Pound did expect a certain level of erudition in his reader approaching (but perhaps not equaling) his own, we might take Browning at his word here and apply his wisdom to his self-styled protégé's magnum opus, Pound's Cantos. We do not need to understand all of Pound's referents in order to understand what is happening in his poem. After all, this is the same Pound (or at least a similar

³³ Richard S. Kennedy and Donald S. Hair, *The Dramatic Imagination of Robert Browning: A Literary Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 66-67.

³⁴ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 43.

one – there were many) who claimed in *ABC of Reading* (1934) that “poetry begins to atrophy when it gets too far from music.”³⁵ The music of poetry sometimes plays across the surface and sometimes runs subtle and deep, but its locus is always the page, or at its most external the space between the page and a given reading or performance. It does not rest in allusion and exterior referents.

This is not to say that allusion, ideology, and other abstractions external to verse do not play a central role in the *Cantos*. An understanding of Pound’s sources, beliefs, and aims is essential to understanding the didactic aspects of the poem.³⁶ But that didacticism, important though it is, is the very sort of thing which runs the risk of causing poetry to “atrophy.” The most artistically successful moments of the *Cantos* are those that maintain their stirring musicality in spite of the demagogic aspirations of the work as a whole. Consider the oft-quoted Canto XVI, beginning “With Usura,” which Pound himself recorded in a dramatic, incantatory tone rife with elaborately rolled Rs and sticky fricatives. In part, this is a case of Pound the self-made half-mad prophet playing a role (and playing it rather well), a self-aggrandizing gambit from the same man who wrote on an acetate recording of his “Sestina: Altaforte”³⁷ that it should not be played for Harvard undergraduates lest they be incited to riot. But it is very much the case that the text itself invites and benefits from such a vigorous oral performance. Lines such as “Usura is a murrain,

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁶ If one wants to. Pound’s didacticism is the very sort of thing Poe railed against a century earlier in “The Poetic Principle.” Between their epic aspirations and their goal of social reform, we might safely conclude that the *Cantos* would not have pleased Poe.

³⁷ Located in the Woodberry Poetry Room, Harvard University; I am indebted to curator Christina Davis for bringing it to my attention.

usura / blunteth the needle in the maiden's hand / and stoppeth the spinner's cunning..."³⁸ sway and halt, lull the reader with their assonance and concord, move dancelike across a mere backdrop of economic ideology which here, unlike elsewhere, it is possible to ignore almost entirely. Moreover, we do not need to know that the line "Came no church of cut stone signed: Adamo me fecit" alludes to the Church of San Zeno in Verona³⁹ in order to understand the universal gesture of pride in craft that the words "Adam made me" represent (although a little Latin helps as well).

What we do need to determine is how exactly an extended passage of incantatory language fits into a broader poetic texture that also includes rampant colloquialism, lengthy quotation, unrestrained invective, stark imagism, and everything else from musical notation to ideograms. In other words, what is the reader to make of this long and complex work even on the surface level – what can the reader call it? Where is the cohesion in such a pastiche, and what affinity does it have, or not have, with the tradition of epic? Finally, of paramount importance to our present discussion, what role does ethos, or character, play in the work? A contemporary retrospective by R. W. Flint of the then-unfinished *Cantos* expresses the somewhat oversimplified view that the *Cantos* are a sort of confessional or Romantic autobiography, straining to turn Pound into a Modernist Wordsworth:

Pound's real subject, however, apart from and in addition to anything he professes, extends beyond the Decay of Europe and even the Decay of Tradition; it is nothing less than Pound himself, and with many a plea, as a poet reacting to and embodying decay and also as a man living inside it.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 229.

³⁹ Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 179.

⁴⁰ R. W. Flint, "Review: New Books of Verse," *Kenyon Review* 11:1 (1949), 165-171.

Granted, Flint is writing primarily about the Pisan Cantos, a work that contains far more biographical and situational detail than the earlier Cantos that we are primarily concerned with in this chapter. But to say that Pound himself is the “real subject” of any extended part of the Cantos is to deny the dramatic impersonality and objectification to which he exposes his poetic material more often than not. If Ezra Pound is the subject of the Cantos, it is only insofar as the Cantos are (or attempt to be) about everything, and Pound is a part of that everything.

Decades later, Hugh Kenner champions a quite different view in his groundbreaking and contentious study *The Pound Era*. Kenner is comfortable with the relatively uncomplicated notion of Pound as a writer of epic, and characterizes Pound’s relationship to the tradition of ethos in epic thus:

The Renaissance poet was expected to possess poetic omni-competence built on wide practical experience; thus Milton’s time as Cromwell’s Latin Secretary counted toward his preparation for writing his epic. The American, whom frontier conditions forced to play Odysseus, prized versatility likewise. Perhaps it was inevitable that some day an American should fuse the epic bard with the epic subject, Renaissance poet with Homeric hero, so clearly do all the specifications converge: poet as musician, as sculptor, as economist; hero as traveller, as role-player, as observer of “many men’s manners.”⁴¹

In Kenner’s view, Pound’s “versatility,” which in the early verse manifests itself in the poetic impersonality of personae, leads to an unprecedented comingling of textual functions in the Cantos, a blurry space in which “bard” and “subject” – author, narrator, character, hero – are all blended into an amalgamated mishmash that still maintains powerful and significant links with the tradition of epic.

⁴¹ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 267-8.

But it is crucial to also consider the poet's own views regarding the relationship between his life's work and the idea of epic, a relationship that is inseparable from his often-changing view of what exactly Epic is. In 1909, long before the *Cantos* came into being, Pound expressed a firm belief in the possibility of an American epic tradition stemming from Whitman, a tradition of an extended work in an individual, bardic voice, a work that would serve the function he would later refer to (quoting Kipling) as "the tale of the tribe." Nevertheless, in 1924 Pound claimed to be merely working on "a long poem," saying about A Draft of XVI *Cantos* (one of several steps toward what would eventually become the first section of the final product) that "it ain't an epic."⁴² Ronald Bush ascribes this hesitance to an old-fashioned adherence to a traditional and rather conservative set of requirements of the sort that Northrop Frye would eventually ascribe to epic (based on a normative Homeric model) and to which Pound did not at that time expect the *Cantos* to conform. No doubt Pound was motivated at least in part by "deference to certain intellectual fashions of his youth," as Bush aptly puts it,⁴³ but it is also conceivable that something substantive changed in the poet's thinking between his loose conception of Epic in 1909, his proto-New Critical strict constructionism of 1924, and the view he eventually arrived at that the *Cantos* are in fact a legitimate modern epic based on his own oft-repeated definition of epic as "a poem containing history."

This shift, I will now argue, runs parallel to a shift in Pound's own conception of the role of ethos, or character, in epic. We have seen that Pound's early works establish fictive personae which not only evade the Romantic notion of subjective and revelatory consciousness, but also tamper with the Browning-esque model of characters as potential objects of contemplation and

⁴² Quoted in Ronald Bush, *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 74.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 73.

judgment outside of the confines of the poem itself. We may think of this as Phase One of Pound's evisceration of ethos. It is a new, modern, but still relatively uncomplicated attitude toward ethos, and it makes sense that the younger Pound, engaged in sketches, snapshots, and artifacts and not yet plotting to write the great Western epic of the 20th century, would not identify his own poetic project with the Whitmanian bardic mode, yet would still see the idea of an American Epic tradition as something rich and real, worthy of contemplation and theorization but still fundamentally foreign to his own immediate designs.⁴⁴ In short, the stakes of the idea of epic, at least for the younger Pound, were relatively low.

By the 1924 publication of *Draft of XVI*, however, Pound had been through a decade of struggle with the idea of epic as he slowly took his own "long poem" from its slightest beginnings to the first draft of what would become the foundational section of its constantly expanding form. This period, Phase Two, saw Pound fretting extensively about the role of narrator and character both in traditional epic and in his modern long poem, as we will spend the next few pages exploring. His former conception of a simple, American, bardic first-person, exemplified by Whitman or an inheritor of his tradition, no longer made sense as he tried to work his way into his own form of long poem and discover how the personae he had mastered in his previous phase could or could not fit into a poem that traced its lineage, sometimes explicitly, back to Homer. Phase Three, as we will also see, represents the resolution of this crisis, the period in which Pound's solution to the problem of ethos fully congealed, when the hushed backdrop of political, cultural, and economic history, the mythos, came rushing in to fill the void

⁴⁴ According to Bush, the young Pound had "been planning an epic poem of one kind or other ever since his undergraduate days at Hamilton" (Bush, 22). I do not mean to call into question this well-established biographical fact. I only mean to suggest that the particular problems of what is and is not an "epic" were not of immediate concern to Pound before he began his project in earnest.

left behind by the evisceration of ethos, as the author of the Cantos rejected the twin notions of the epic hero and the epic narrator, Odysseus and Whitman both. This represents the mature phase of Pound's development of the idea of modern epic, and had lasting repercussions throughout the first half of the twentieth century and well into the second half when, as we will see in subsequent chapters, other poets such as Berryman, Lowell, and Rich responded in their own complicated ways by creating long poems that restored the balance between Mythos and Ethos that the Epic lost in the hands of Pound and his acolytes.

Near the beginning of the poem originally titled "Three Cantos I," appearing in Poetry magazine in June of 1917, Pound engages with the spirit of Robert Browning in a mode that is half worshipful and half full of nervous jealousy. "Hang it all," the poem begins, as would the final version of Canto II when it appeared nearly a decade and a half later, "there can be but one Sordello!" Very deliberately, with all the self-control of his erstwhile Imagist years and his concurrent involvement with Vorticism, the poet shakes a fist at a past which he cannot replicate nor dwell entirely within. It is both the past of the historical Sordello, a mildly romanticized 13th century Italy where Western culture still thrived, and the more recent past of Browning himself, the misunderstood genius (in Pound's eyes) reinventing the relationship between poet and character that the Romantics – Byron's Harold and Don Juan, Wordsworth's self – had smothered in narcissism. Where Milton begins *Paradise Lost* with a promise of novelty ("Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme"), Pound begins his epic in a state of frustration, knowing that what he would attempt both has been done before (his love of Sordello is the love of a reader who wishes he were the author) and cannot be done at all in the modern age (with Western culture in decline, with the vibrancy of the troubadours supplanted by a Europe ravaged by war and economic ruin, an age that "demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace," as Pound

would later write⁴⁵). But maybe, Pound posits, “the modern world / Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in” – and maybe if “I dump my catch, shiny and silvery / As fresh sardines flapping and slipping on the marginal cobbles,” then – then what?

Pound lets the answer to this question emerge slowly over the next thirty or so lines. First we witness glimpses of Sordello’s world, a panoply of towers, windows, and moats, fragmented relics of another time and another poetic world:

Tower by tower
Red-brown the rounded bases, and the plan
Follows the builder’s whim. Beaucaire’s slim gray
Leaps from the stubby base of Altaforte –
Mohammed’s windows, for the Alcazar
Has such a garden, split by a tame small stream. . . .
(3 Cantos, 114)

It is also Browning’s imagined world and, in a sense, Pound’s. Crucially, though, the method of imagination and presentation that Pound employs breaks radically with the conjuring act that Browning performs in the opening passages of his poem:

Lo, the past is hurled
In twain : up-thrust, out-staggering on the world,
Subsiding into shape, a darkness rears
Its outline, kindles at the core, appears
Verona. ’T is six hundred years and more
Since an event. The Second Friedrich wore
The purple, and the Third Honorius filled
The holy chair. . . .⁴⁶

⁴⁵ In Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, “II”. Ezra Pound, *Personae* (New York: Boni & Liverlight, 1926), 188.

⁴⁶ Robert Browning, “Sordello,” in *Browning’s Complete Poetical Works* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1895), 75.

Notice the sharp line that Browning draws between the realm of representation – the narrator’s space – and the realm of that which is narrated, the posited actuality of an intact and vibrant Verona six hundred years gone, a place of living creatures who can, with a gesture of poesis, be conjured out of the mists of time and into the sharp focus of the immediate textual present.

For Pound, this sort of narrative immediacy is never an option. Even in “Three Cantos,” the first manifestation of the project that would eventually consume the rest of his creative life, Pound cautiously presents places, events, and –most importantly to the present discussion – people in a poetic mode that is both unmediated (they are not conjured into the textual present by an agentive narrator) and deeply removed, alienated from the reader by their fragmentary nature and by the obvious gulf of time that gapes between the present age and the remoter era. In some ways this can be seen as the logical extension of both Imagism and Vorticism. The former concerned itself with brevity, purity, and a singleness of poetic purpose, the unmediated production of image out of text, while the latter sought a similar end while acknowledging the chaos of motion that always surrounds the points of stasis that Imagism sought to isolate from their organic context. Pound’s mode of historical presentation, beginning here and continuing throughout the Cantos, is a skillful balance between the two ideas, an ability and a determination to present fragments of history – including its people, its characters – so that they can be experienced both as static tableaux and as the center of a chaotic whirlpool whose presence the reader might infer from the sheer messiness of the world and the enormous white noise of history.

This is consistent with Bush’s assertion that “Pound declared his poem would include many tales instead of just one, and would provide a kaleidoscope of incidents instead of ‘one

whole man' for his narrator to meditate upon."⁴⁷ Perhaps the single most telling passage in "Three Cantos: I" is the one in which Pound makes as if to berate Browning for historical inaccuracy but swerves away at the last moment in a deft twist that defines and justified Pound's own poetic process for decades afterward:

And half your dates are out, you mix up your eras;
For that great font Sordello sat beside —
'Tis an immortal passage, but the font? —
Is some two centuries outside the picture.
Does it matter?

Not in the least. . . .

(3 Cantos, 114)

The mixing of incongruous entities in the name of a messy organicism that is both of poetry and of history is more important than strict adherence to truth and verisimilitude. Modernist collage thus becomes not a formal metaphor for a broken world and culture (as we are used to thinking about it especially in the context of Eliot's *The Waste Land*), but rather a trans-historical, associative cloud whose accretive function is to create rather than to represent the already-having-been-destroyed. The "kaleidoscope of incidents" is itself a sort of Vortex, and the truth at its core is a truth not about the world, exactly, and certainly not about "one whole man," but rather about the process of poesis itself, the human act of making art out of socio-historical truth. The mythos of the poem is a story about poetry itself, the tale of the tale of the tribe and what it has become in an age that cannot confront itself without confronting all others.

We might question, though, whether Bush's phrase "meditate upon" is the only way of describing the relationship between the making mind governing the Cantos, and the snippets of the world that the reader is shown. The implications of the phrase are distinctly Romantic and suggest a form of meaning-seeking contemplation, of glossing history with text, that is not in

⁴⁷ Bush, 85.

keeping with the Cantos' aesthetic of self-contained and self-sustaining poesis, the text that, not through allusion and reference but through the confluence of many allusions and references, creates a microcosm that still manages to gesture outward into its own primordial nebula. Together, this microcosm and the means of its creation form the principal point of readerly interest in the poem, and they are the principal objects that the contemplative reader might choose to meditate upon. But the narrative voice of the Cantos, which, after all, slips in and out of existence so often that we might be better served thinking of it as authorial interpolation rather than narratorial consistency, is not itself an agent of meditation upon its own conjured fragments.

In fact it is hard to say whether it is even the agent behind the conjuring itself, especially as Pound's epic style progresses from the earliest Cantos ("Three Cantos," 1917) to the first to survive unchanged as part of the work as a whole ("A Draft of XVI Cantos," 1924). There is an important shift between the opening of "Three Cantos: I," which, as we have just seen, drifts from narrative voice to historical fragments and back to narrative voice, and its transformed afterlife as Canto II, which opens with the following five lines:

Hang it all, Robert Browning,
there can be but the one "Sordello."
But Sordello, and my Sordello?
Lo Sordels si fo di Mantovana.
So-shu churned in the sea. . .

(Cantos, 6)

After this interpolation of a line from a Provencal life of the historical Sordello and an allusion to an insulting remark by Chinese poet Li Po about a literary rival – fragments indeed, harvested from the breadth of the world – the narrative voice does not return. It lives a brief life as a blip at the beginning and then fades thoroughly away. Certainly it returns at the beginning of Canto III – in fact in a stronger form that gives the impression of actual autobiographical fact –

I sat on the Dogana's steps
For the gondolas cost too much, that year . . .

– but as the Canto continues into a realm of floating Tuscan gods and anecdotes of the Cid, the “authentic” voice of the narrator or author swiftly vanishes, an illusion easily dispelled by the brutal forces of history that never stop seething throughout the poem’s many pages.

Ultimately, this is exactly how Pound solves the sticky problem of “There can be but the one Sordello.” He is able to refresh epic, to forge the next link in the long lineage from Homer onward, through a move no less radical than scooping out the meat of Achilles, Odysseus, Aeneas, Sordello – the epic hero, even the epic character – and replacing it with ideas about the thing itself, with a complicated poetic enactment of the processes of thought and of history through which epic comes into being and sustains itself. Pound creative a breed of epic almost entirely without ethos by making epic itself its own subject. Or, in other words, ethos is evicted, while mythos, usually the backdrop to more conspicuously human dramas, rushes in to replace it. Perhaps this is what Robert Fitzgerald meant when he wrote of Pound in the Cantos “turning myth into something immediate” – immediate in the same way that, say, the wrath of Achilles is “immediate” in the Iliad.⁴⁸ This topsy-turvy rearrangement of the traditional roles of textual functions created a profound change in American and European conceptions of epic, although it also removed what had for centuries – millennia, even – been perhaps the most crucial component of epic: ethos, character, the licentious absence of which led not only to some of the less successful open-form epics of the mid-twentieth century but also, on a happier note, to the revivification of epic ethos that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s in the hands of Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Adrienne Rich, and others, pioneers who did not necessarily write epics

⁴⁸ Robert Fitzgerald, “A Note on Ezra Pound, 1928-56,” ,” *Kenyon Review* 18:4 (1956), 505-518.

themselves but who found bold and innovative ways to salvage the best of the traditional epic opposition between ethos and mythos from the wreckage of Poundian modernism.

Chapter 2: Berryman's Dante, Dante's Virgil, and the Ascension of Ethos

“ . . . and he took with him five books,
a Whitman & a Purgatorio,
a one-volume dictionary,
an Oxford Bible with all its bays & nooks
& one other new book-O.”

(DS279)

1966 found John Berryman traveling to Ireland on a Guggenheim Fellowship to finish work on the epic poem that had occupied well over a decade of his professional life. The first three “books” of *The Dream Songs* had been published in 1964 as *77 Dream Songs*. The remaining four would appear in 1968 as “His Toy, His Dream, His Rest.” The direction of the epic varied with the direction of its author’s life—an inevitability when a work is born so gradually—and at times *The Dream Songs* sings the story of its own genesis. One such moment is Dream Song 279. Here the quotidian and the transcendent intersect sharply as the poem offers a wryly vatic and startlingly optimistic meditation on poetry and spiritual love while describing the physical and material circumstances of the poet’s journey away from America and toward Ireland. The middle stanza, quoted above, jolts the reader out of the universal language of the poem’s opening—“Leaving behind the country of the dead / where he must then return and die himself . . .”—and into the ephemeral space of the speaker’s luggage. While the reading material listed could comprise a lifetime’s worth of literary, spiritual, and philosophical ideas, not to mention the whole of the English language (in the form of a dictionary) and the unrestricted potential of the literary future (in the playful cipher of “one other new book-O”), the reader still feels the brute materiality of all that weighty paper tugging a suitcase earthward. Literary history, influence, precedent and tradition are present as a measurable force: his literal baggage.

Books are things to Berryman, and their influence is profound, physical. In *Dream Song* 77, which we will examine in greater detail later on, they become the accoutrements of leave-taking—"Wif a book of his in either hand / he is stript down to move on"—and even extensions of the body—" . . . with in each hand / one of his own mad books and all, / ancient fire for eyes, his head full / & his heart full . . ." The strange imagery hints at a concealed or at least highly original iconography that the poet uses to paint his own spiritual portrait. One might think of the *arma Christi* tradition in medieval art, in which a specific set of material objects related to the Christian narrative of the Passion—cross, spear, sponge, etc.—are depicted in inseparable conjunction with the body of Christ, almost as though they formed a sort of material exoskeleton, an extension of the bodily self into the world of things, an association that would not have been lost on Berryman the scholar, Berryman the winner of the Oldham Shakespeare Prize in 1937⁴⁹—Berryman of the categorical, cataloguing mind. For Berryman to thus corporealize the book is to grant it a sort of hyper-materialism, because what, after all, is more material than the body itself? Even the weight of the five books in the suitcase can be understood only through the sensorial sympathy of an imagined act of lifting. Books are real—things. Their subjects may be transcendent, as Berryman the scholar would no doubt agree, but they themselves are concrete objects that at the least interact with, and at the most are a part of, the human body.

And so the literary tradition is at least in part woven into the posited body of the *Dream Songs*' protagonist, Henry, and by proxy into the authorial ontology of Berryman himself. Furthermore, in the age of the mass market paperback, the materiality and corporeality of the book in Berryman's poetry aligns him specifically with medieval European writers who similarly

⁴⁹ Peter Rawlings, *Emerson, Melville, James, Berryman: Great Shakespeareans: Vol. 8* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 137.

saw text not as abstraction but as physical presence, a thing to be manipulated by and to interact with the human body in significant ways that are productive of meaning.⁵⁰ One of the most important precedents of this line of thought is the well-known passage in Augustine's *Confessions* when the author as a young man hears a voice telling him "tolle, lege, tolle, lege"—take up, read, take up, read. The physical act of lifting is integral to the process of internalizing the text (in this case Christian scripture), just as Berryman's possession of "one of his own mad books" in each hand seems integral to the "moving on" that the poem intimates by hovering at the threshold of a great departure, or as the five in his suitcase seem integral to intercontinental and cross-cultural motion. As for the existence of the book as a corporeal object or an extension of the body, medieval literature is riddled with references to the book as a thing to be eaten in order to internalize its teachings. Through "eating" the book, its contents become a part of the reader through the bodily workings of memory.⁵¹ Just as Berryman's books appear as extensions of his own efficacious limbs in *DS77*, so the book becomes an extension of its reader's cognitive faculties through an act as physical and corporeal as eating a meal. Conversely, the body—specifically the mind—is itself often treated like a book throughout the middle ages. This is most famously seen in Dante, who in the first sentence of *La vita nuova* as well as in the *Paradiso*

⁵⁰ Of course, "medieval European writers" is a heinous generalization that overlooks vast differences between nations, cultures, and centuries. My excuse is that "medieval Europe," in the decades and milieu of Berryman's intellectual maturity, referred primarily to the 12th through the early 15th century in Western Europe, as well as to the earlier texts and artifacts pertinent to that culture—Augustine's writings, for instance. This prejudice was as common to the non-specialist then as it is today, and is even reinforced (to no great harm) by classic scholarly works such as Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1924).

⁵¹ The biblical loci for this metaphor are Ezekiel 3:3 and Revelation 10:9; notable medieval references include Anselm in the 11th century and Hugo de Folieto in the 12th. For more, see Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 161-167.

writes of the mind as though it can be written upon like a book, physically inscribed with memories and images.⁵² Thus the relationship between book and body is one of reciprocal identity—and Henry’s very existence is best understood not autobiographically or confessionally, but rather as a complex interaction between the text of the Dream Songs and the corporeal shadow of literary tradition.

As for the writers of books, they too take on a reality in the Dream Songs that extends beyond the limited being of hypothetical historical author-functions. Writers often appear as concrete, living individuals to whom, notably, the poems attribute traits that are not intimately connected to their work. They are figures with whom the poet’s voice can find fault (“Rilke was a jerk,” DS3), brawl (“while he begins to have it out with Horace,” DS38), or engage in indiscreet liaisons of the imagination (“Miss Dickinson—fancy in Amherst bedding hér,” DS187)—in other words, humans. Like books, they have an immediate presence within the universe that Berryman creates in the Dream Songs. The text is haunted by these figures of the dead, both the long-dead and the more recent departed (friends and peers of Berryman’s, including Schwartz, Blackmur, Jarrell, Roethke, and Plath), and although the speaking voices of the poems seldom engage them in dialogue, the reality granted to them by the opinions and actions that surround them places them as part of the landscape of the poem in a way that might remind the reader of the landscape of Dante’s imagined afterlife in the *Commedia*, which is as much a geography of human interactions as it is a theological and metaphysical journey.

I mention all this so that we might begin to place Berryman in a milieu heavily influenced by Dante’s particular breed of epic: personal, material, and ethos-driven. This chapter argues that

⁵² “In quella parte del libro de la mia memoria dinanzi a la quale poco si potrebbe leggere,” begins *La vita nuova*—“In that part of the book of my memory before which little can be read.” Canto 17 of *Paradiso* uses the phrase “scritto nella mente,” that is, written/inscribed in the mind. See Carruthers, 290, note 1.

aside from his mere influence, Dante and the idea of epic provided Berryman with an aesthetic model on which to base his own bold poetic experiments, catalyzing the transition from the traditionalist formalism of his less successful early verse into the metrical, psychological, and narratological novelty of the long poems that would make his reputation, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and *77 Dream Songs*. We will also examine the ways in which important themes from the *Commedia* are at play in the very texture of the *Dream Songs*, Berryman's epic, and how the tripartite structure of *77 Dream Songs* is loosely, but significantly and demonstrably, inspired by the structure of Dante's *Commedia*. Through the panache and play of the *Dream Song*'s disjunctive voices, it can be hard to hear the strain of a literary tradition that is older and arguably more culturally conservative than any of Berryman's numerous other influences from Shakespeare to minstrelsy to Hart Crane. But Berryman's affinity for Dante and the middle ages is at the same time a surprising and noteworthy gesture in a generation that variously looked toward academic classicism, biographical exhibitionism, and self-conscious counterculturalism for its poetic inspiration (as did, say, Lowell, Plath, and Ginsberg, respectively). Finally, understanding the place of *77 Dream Songs* within the history of epic is impossible until we acknowledge not only the debt that the work owes to Dante, who himself was a radical re-imaginer of the role epic could play in a (then) modern society, but also that using Dante in this fashion constituted a deliberate departure not only from the literary heritage of the epic as re-conceived by Pound, but also from the very different influence that Dante had on the high modernist poetics of T. S. Eliot.

Berryman's Lyrical Shortcomings

Critical retrospection and contemporary laurels tend to agree that Berryman did not find a truly effective voice until *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (published in 1953 but started in 1948, hot on the heels of *The Dispossessed*), his long narrative poem about the eponymous colonial American poet, whose life and personality fascinated Berryman even if her literary accomplishments left him cold. Prior to *Bradstreet*, Berryman's work had been by no means poor—he had achieved relative success and recognition, and was probably well on his way to becoming at least an historically noteworthy “poets’ poet”—but a certain coldness of tone prevents many of his early poems from being as moving or memorable as his later achievements. Their style is that of highly (and self-consciously) accomplished literature, their music is that of an astute and perceptive ear, but their formality, formalism, and academic posturing lack both the economy of his hero, W. B. Yeats, and the vatic bravado of his contemporary, Robert Lowell. Berryman's turn toward an original and successful aesthetic occurred simultaneously with his turn away from traditional lyric and toward a reinvention of epic. This is no mere coincidence; rather, it represents the profoundly liberating effect that confronting the problem of modern epic had on Berryman, who until *Bradstreet* was concerned primarily with the imitation of a living tradition rather than the recasting of a relatively dead one. In other words, epic was Berryman's ticket to fame and the catalyst of his poetic success.

Berryman's admiration of Yeats's linguistic austerity is evident in an early essay on Yeats's drama (1936, the same year he received his B.A.), in which he speaks of “a remarkable uniformity of style . . . [W]e see his vocabulary becoming more concrete, dependent on nouns rather than on adjectives, the unit of sound within the line briefer . . .”⁵³ Further on, Berryman

⁵³ John Berryman, “The Ritual of W. B. Yeats,” in *The Freedom of the Poet*, 247.

observes that “[Yeats] at once lessened the probability of failure by obviating the necessity of using techniques not natural to him, and emphasized his accustomed talent by letting it work alone to the fullest advantage and with an appropriate subject matter.”⁵⁴ Looking back from the wild variety of the Dream Songs, it is difficult to imagine a Berryman who placed so much stock in relative literary asceticism, but it is not difficult to find traces or even tracts of this aesthetic in his early lyrics, many of which seem overly concerned with lessening “the probability of failure” by taking few of the risks that would become the trademark of Berryman’s mature style.

Consider one of Berryman’s best recognized and most anthologized pre-Bradstreet lyrics, “The Ball Poem.” The poem begins naively, both in diction and in syntax:

What is the boy now, who has lost his ball,
What, what is he to do? I saw it go
Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then
Merrily over—there it is in the water!

(CP, 11)

The cleverness of the opening word is subtle and coolly intellectual: it is unclear whether the “What” here stands alone as a separate ontological question (What is the boy, now that his ball is gone?) or anticipates the “what is he to do” of line 2 with “now, who had lost his ball” merely a syntactic detour. There is pleasure in the ambiguity, as there is perhaps in the invitingly Freudian associations of “ball,” but it is the pleasure the learned reader of poetry takes in recognizing a device well-executed, not the shock or awe of the truly unfamiliar. Moreover, the naivety of diction, particularly the song-like repetition of “what” and the unremitting monosyllables of the first two lines, broken only by the playful “merrily bouncing,” demonstrate the poet’s mastery of the precedents of poetic diction but not necessarily his ability to deploy it in an original way. The monosyllables echo the child-diction of Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven,” the repetition echoes

⁵⁴ Ibid., 249.

the border ballad (as did Wordsworth, for that matter), but the tricks of the past masters are in no way altered or ironized—they are simply used, skillfully, yes, but with the coolness of exercise.⁵⁵

Berryman's manipulation of the poem's blank verse is no less masterful, shuffling feet around for meaningful effect and delicate enactment of sentiment, as in the following lines:

An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy
As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down
All his young days in the harbor where
His ball went. I would not intrude on him . . .

(CP, 11)

Through its metrical substitutions, the dactyl “ultimate” that is paid for with the spondee “grief fixes,” the first of these lines yanks the reader along through a rush of verse followed by a nervous, teetering pause. The regularity of the next line, by contrast, seems the very embodiment of the numbness that follows loss, while the heavy caesura that ends the sentence—“went” is, after all, at least half-stressed, if not wholly—drive home the physical sensation of finality: that with the loss of the ball, something is ended forever. It is all done with great skill, and there can be no mistaking that Berryman's is an ear well honed on Shakespeare (“Knowing what every man must one day know,” a little later, could almost be an outtake from the Sonnets), but one might rightly accuse it of showmanship without daring, a “masterpiece” in the old sense of a clear demonstration of competence. This is not to say that it is a bad poem, or even a middling one. It is quite good, and it makes a statement about “[t]he epistemology of loss” that speaks profoundly to a generation's understanding of the human condition.⁵⁶ It even ends with a twist in

⁵⁵ Here I am indebted to Helen Vendler, from whom I learned to associate all monosyllabic diction with Wordsworthian childishness unless it produce a convincing alibi.

⁵⁶ Thomas Travisano, *Midcentury Quartet* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 115.

perspective, or at least in grammatical person, of the sort that Berryman would exploit to even greater effect in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*:

. . . I am everywhere,
I suffer and move, my mind and my heart move
With all that move me, under the water
Or whistling. I am not a little boy.

(CP, 11)

But in spite of all this, the poem comes across as an exercise in the sort of Yeatsian restraint that Berryman the undergraduate had praised in 1936: “uniformity of style,” “dependent on nouns rather than on adjectives,” and most of all “lessen[ing] the probability of failure by obviating . . . techniques not natural . . .” I have trimmed the quotation to exclude “to him,” because for Berryman, as we shall see, “techniques not natural” would come to suit him better than any other—though not until he moved beyond the austerity of his early lyrical phase.

Seven years after Berryman’s essay on Yeats, a contemporary critic outlines exactly why Berryman’s project of *imitatio* is less than wholly successful.⁵⁷ Arthur Mizener writes in 1943:

. . . Mr. Berryman is a writer of considerable natural talent who has modelled himself, in most of these poems, with painstaking—indeed humorless—literalness on Yeats. It is unfortunately the case, however, that Mr. Berryman is quite unlike Yeats in both personality and conviction. This is most obvious where his liberal sympathy for strikers takes the incongruous form of “Words for Music Perhaps” (“River Rouge, 1932”), or where, by extension, the lurid, full-scale tragedy of “Edward, Edward” is reduced to a commentary on the Nazi-Soviet Pact (“Communist”). The effect of this is to make Mr. Berryman’s respectable and commonplace feelings look silly. Something of this same kind, though to a less distressing extent, goes on in the long poems too. It was one thing for Yeats, with his dignity, his humor, his profoundness of mind, to dramatize himself as “a sixty-

⁵⁷ It would be a grave error to suggest that Berryman ever turned entirely away from Yeats. Rather, the particular aspects of Yeats on which Berryman drew shifted over the course of his career. As Berryman left behind his imitation of austere diction, he began to embrace the idea of the Yeatsian mask, creating by the time of the *Dream Songs* a poetic voice that is “a new object in nature which is not him but which is not nature either.” See Jerome Mazzaro, “The Yeatsian Mask: John Berryman.”

year-old smiling public man.” But Mr. Berryman mediating solemnly over a game of Chinese checkers is too small for Yeats’s boots. Where Yeats could catch his whole poem up in a bold burst of romantic imagery, Mr. Berryman seems only to be playing tricks.⁵⁸

The main objection here is to the disparity between tricks & silliness and the inherent nobility of Yeatsian form and diction, with a touch of umbrage at the unintentional bathos of Berryman’s more political poems. Mizener’s point is not that Berryman ought to be statelier in sentiments or more radical in form, but rather that his odd admixture of the newspaper-and-diary quotidian into a form fit for mythopoeisis simply does not function. It seems that Berryman’s career ought to have matured in either of two directions: he could set aside trivialities for grander themes, or he could adopt a wilder sort of poetic diction and let go of his perfectionist formalism that in 1941 was characterized thus:

Berryman is most certainly a skillful craftsman; for example, his poem, *The Return*, is a model of sustained method—one notices the method, returns to confirm the method, leaves the poem remembering the method. Berryman’s attitudes of form . . . resolve into attitudes of language; we are once more in the midst of the academic and the special, and poetry is being further withdrawn from its wellspring of natural speech.⁵⁹

It is in keeping with Berryman’s character that he would reject both the right-hand path of the stately sage and the left-hand path of innovative rebellion in favor of an unexpected third way that capitalizes on the disparities that marred his early verse instead of making any attempt to resolve them. It took some time, of course, and the argument can be made that in attempting to shift out of the shadow of Yeats, Berryman’s verse became more muddled before it became more wholly his own: as late as 1954, Oscar Cargill (who, it seems, has not yet gotten his hands on a copy of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*) laments that “clarity has given way to turgidity as

⁵⁸ Arthur Mizener, “Poetry from Right to Left,” *The Kenyon Review* 5:1 (1943): 156.

⁵⁹ W. T. Scott, “The New Intellectualism: Two Views,” *Poetry* 58:2 (1941): 89.

metaphor tumbles over metaphor and observation crowds upon observation, as in ‘New Year’s Eve’ and ‘The Dispossessed.’”⁶⁰ Berryman took a clear risk in cultivating a style that incorporates experimental diction alongside classical poise, a mild mixing of thematic registers, and flares of lowbrow comedy alongside Parnassian aspirations. Such bold experimentation requires some centripetal principle, a coherent poetics of the very sort to which mid-century America had developed an allergy.

When Berryman began *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* on March 22, 1948,⁶¹ there was no indication that it would be a drastic departure from his previous work—a long poem, yes, but *The Dispossessed* already had its long poem in “Chinese Checkers”; to begin another one was hardly to break self-consciously from the precedent of his career or style. There was a grain of rebellion in the project from the start, though: in April he jotted a note that said, among other things, “I can trust myself now never to mean. Luxuriate therefore,” and, memorably, “Evil of Stevens, disquiet me no more. I am sober, subject-ed, formal. Riot therefore! with good conscious.”⁶² The poet who made this private statement of self-reflection clearly was aware of his own shortcomings, the dangers of Stevensian meditation without a Dionysian counterpoise, and the harm to poetry that can come from a failure to riot “with good conscious.” Yet the five years between the inception and the completion of *Bradstreet* were mired in self-doubt, financial difficulties, and slow progress in his own work (including the abandoned project *The Black Book*, his answer both to the Holocaust and to Dante’s *Inferno*—more on this later). By June of

⁶⁰ Oscar Cargill, “Poetry since the Deluge,” *The English Journal* 43:2 (1954): 61.

⁶¹ Paul Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990), 207.

⁶² John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 197.

1952, Berryman “still had no idea how long [Homage to Mistress Bradstreet] would be, and might go anywhere ‘from 3 to 25 pages’”; the 125 lines he had by the end of that month were “the first substantial progress he’d made on the poem in four years.”⁶³ The progress that forged the poem into the lengthy composition that would secure Berryman’s reputation—with its innovative use of the poet himself as a character, its oddly erotic dialog, its graphically inventive language of childbirth, its devastating final four stanzas, and above all its linguistic ingenuity and freedom of syntax and diction⁶⁴—occurred in a frenzy during the first three months of 1953.

Whether one wishes to take the fact as causal or merely correlative, it is undeniably the case that this great leap forward in the range of Berryman’s diction and the efficacy of his disparities occurred hand-in-hand with his attempt to solve the problem of the long, social, nation-building poem in twentieth-century America. Berryman’s Bradstreet becomes a mother figure as well as a lover, and in spite of his own disdain for her verse it is easy to read Bradstreet as notes toward a “tale of the tribe” of American poets. To call the poem a full-fledged epic would be something of an exaggeration, but in its capacity as narrative and mythopoeic quasi-biography, a hybrid aesthetic of apotheosis and “warts-and-all” realism, it does have a strong affinity with the tradition of epic insofar as the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, *Paradise Lost*, and the *Commedia* transmutate legendary or historical figures (Odysseus, Aeneas, Satan/Adam/Eve, and, in the case of Dante, too many to mention) by both elevating them to the renowned position of literary ethos—a more stable state than legendary ethos, which is more culturally fundamental but also more vulnerable to transformation or even sublation—and also degrading them through

⁶³ Mariani, 247-8.

⁶⁴ Diane Ackerman says it well: “. . . it is hard to parse, even retrospectively” (“Near the Top a Bad Turn Dared,” in *Modern Critical Views: John Berryman*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 101-109.

the precise attribution of material and corporeal traits to their ideal structural forms. This is precisely what Bradstreet does to its eponymous heroine, whose appearance in Berryman's poem as a sexualized, physically unsound, discontented and ultimately dying (bodily, non-heroically) figure is in sharp contrast to the preceding cultural memory of her as "The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America," a font of Puritan wisdom and poetic orthodoxy.

If we think of Bradstreet as the formal intermediary between Berryman's early lyrical stage and his later self-aware tackling of the modern epic in the Dream Songs, we might also note that the poetic diction of Bradstreet is halfway between the Yeatsian austerity of the early poems and the radical dissonance of the Dream Songs and his other late verse. The main difference lies in the fact that the linguistic eccentricities of Bradstreet clearly have their roots in the syntactic freedom of Greek and Latin poetry—notably, the style of Homer and Virgil⁶⁵—and in its earlier English imitation at the hands of Milton. Consider from the second stanza:

I doubt if Simon than this blast, that sea,
spares from his rigour for your poetry
more.

(HMB, 11)

The premature comparative clause is employed to great effect here, equating the cold and elemental husband figure with storm and sea by placing them together as grammatically normal syntax would not allow: it is clear that Berryman is not deploying his eccentricities callously. It

⁶⁵And the classical lyric poets as well—one might think especially of Horace as a paragon of syntactic opacity, and even Catullus has his. Sed contra: Berryman's theme in Bradstreet is not that of an ode or a carmen, nor bucolic nor pastoral nor elegiac . . . etc. The theme is *sui generis*—but I maintain that its classical affinities, if any, lie with epic, at least with respect to the aforementioned extradition of character from the sphere of social memory to the sphere of the literary.

is reminiscent of the Latinate syntax in *Paradise Lost* that Samuel Johnson and Ezra Pound⁶⁶ both hated so vehemently:

. . . him who disobeys
Me disobeys, breaks union, and that day
Cast out from God and blessed vision, falls
Into utter darkness, deep ingulfed, his place
Ordained without redemption, without end.

(V, 611-615)

is hardly less natural to the English ear than the strained syntax of Bradstreet. This is not to say that strained word-order (Latinate in Milton's case, original and strange-making in Berryman's) is necessary unique to epic, but rather that its associations with *Paradise Lost* are so strong that we may safely treat it as a gentle signifier of epic's presence in a 20th-c. vessel. Furthermore, to shift from Yeatsian austerity to Miltonic convolution was an especially bold gesture in an era still overshadowed by the influence and opinions of T. S. Eliot, who famously singled out Milton's style as a pernicious influence that English poets should avoid.⁶⁷ More importantly, it shows Berryman beginning to align himself self-consciously with an epic tradition stylistically as well as thematically. The topoi of epic pushed Berryman toward the language of the English epic, giving his poetry the aesthetic gumption to move beyond the stark poise that was holding it back.

Finally, a minor historical note lends substantial weight to the claim that Berryman's breakthrough in composing *Bradstreet* was correlative with, if not dependent on, the poet's active engagement with literatures of vast ideas. In early 1953, Berryman read through the yet-

⁶⁶ Pound particularly objects in *ABC of Reading* to the phrase "Him who disobeys me disobeys," which I admit drove my choice of example here.

⁶⁷ See "A Note on the Verse of John Milton" (1936) in *Eliot's Selected Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), 116.

unpublished novel *The Adventures of Augie March* by his close friend Saul Bellow. Berryman saw in the work “something of value, something new. He saw now that Bradstreet would have to be completely rethought. It would have to be braver and more ambitious and longer than anything he’d ever tried, longer than ‘Lycidas,’ longer than ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland.’”⁶⁸ According to a review he wrote for *The New York Times Book Review*, what particularly grabbed Berryman in *Augie March* was Bellow’s “wide-ranging and refreshing use of myth . . . Bellow’s ‘recurrent allusiveness to masters of Greek, Jewish, European and American history, literature and philosophy.’”⁶⁹ The significance of these comments should not be underestimated: they are evidence that, just before Bradstreet leapt forward in a frenzy of invention and composition, Berryman was thinking hard about the form, place, and usefulness of the greatest elements of the Western literary canon, including those enormous masters (Bellow called them “Overlords”) who either interacted directly with mythological tradition or had themselves become mythologized through the crowning forces of history. In short, the idea of epic infiltrated Berryman’s writerly consciousness fast and hard—and the energy of the collision helped not only to shape Bradstreet into its final form, but also, inevitably, to challenge the poet to interact even more directly with the tradition of epic in the even greater work that followed, *77 Dream Songs*.

Berryman and the Modernists: Pound, Eliot, and Eliot’s Dante

As we have seen in Chapter One, no single figure exerted a more formidable influence on the idea of the 20th-century epic than Ezra Pound. His radical usurpation of the traditional place

⁶⁸ Mariani, 253.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

of ethos with the enormous themes and ideas of history, economics, nationhood and Western racial identity left a profound mark on the way subsequent generations of poets would approach the problem of epic as well as the corollary problem of the long poem. Yet oddly, Berryman does not engage much with the Poundian mainline of the modernist epic in his writings about and comments on *The Dream Songs*.

Though one or two literary generations separate them, it is important to remember that Ezra Pound, the elder statesman of modernism until his death, outlived Berryman by nearly a year. The final few *Cantos*, though in a fragmentary form with which Pound was not wholly pleased, appeared as late as 1968, the same year Berryman published *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*. Berryman never had the chance to look back on the author of the “tale of the tribe” from a position of historical remove and *oeuvre* termination. This is not to say that Berryman, even the younger Berryman, viewed Pound as a major contemporary influence; in 1948, the year Pound won the Bollington Prize for the *Pisan Cantos*, Berryman said of his modernist elder, in a passage describing the decline of all but historical relevance among the modernists, “Pound’s influence is intermittent”—viz. a good verse now and then, some of which gets noticed, less of which gets meaningfully copied. The comment is noticeably less damning than subsequent remarks, “nobody of interest imitates Frost or Williams much,” or “Aiken and Jeffers have lost heavily.”⁷⁰ The living Pound is a presence to Berryman, although merely an “intermittent” one—and to what extent, or at all, he influenced Berryman himself is debatable.

The matter is of great importance here because Pound not only attempted what is arguably the first major modernist epic, but also drastically rearranged the terms of epic in doing so, elevating mythos to supplant ethos—creating a world that plays upon a stage of itself. As we

⁷⁰ John Berryman, “Poetry Chronicle, 1948: Waiting for the End, Boys,” reprinted in *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Faber, Straus & Giroux, 1976), 298.

will see, Berryman's contribution to the history of twentieth-century epic consists of a radical revitalization of ethos, a move in direct opposition to Pound's. It is unlikely that Berryman thought of Pound's treatment of epic in similar terms to the ones in which we are considering it here, but his familiarity with Pound and his acolytes, along with his own apparent lack of any desire to join their ranks, implies that he was not satisfied with the Poundian solution to the problem of epic. In fact, in spite of his admiration for elements of the elder's verse, it is unclear whether he considered it any solution at all—at least not one of particular relevance to the mid-century poetic milieu.

Berryman's resistance to the existence of a vibrant, contemporary Poundian tradition might suggest that the Dream Songs do not constitute a deliberate attempt to wrench Epic away from the mythos in which Pound had mired it. But we could do far worse than to imagine that Berryman's quietude with regard to Pound's epic was at least in part the result of the younger poet's desire to solve the problem of epic on his own terms. If Pound could be seen as neither a worthy object of emulation nor an object lesson, then Berryman had the freedom to look toward older sources—Homer and, more notably, Dante—to find a precedent poetics. Of course, Berryman was hardly the first 20th-century poet to engage meaningfully with Dante. Before we examine the particular way in which he did, a word or two by way of comparison should be said about T. S. Eliot's equally complex, though markedly different, relationship with Dante.

Memorably (if not legibly), the first lines of verse in Eliot's *Collected Poems*—the epigraph to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"—are Dante's, not Eliot's. The lines come from Canto XVII of the *Inferno*, when Dante meets Guido da Montefeltro in the eighth circle of Hell among the givers of false council. Guido, a Ghibelline general against whom Dante seems

to have had something of a personal grudge,⁷¹ skeptically tells Dante: “If I thought that my answer were to one who might ever return to the world, this flame would shake no more; but since from this depth none ever returned alive, if what I hear is true, I answer you without fear of infamy.”⁷² Already Eliot has established a relationship with Dante that is drastically different from what Berryman’s will be decades later, in several important ways. First, the relationship is a public one. Eliot’s Dante is a Great Poet whose works we all ought to know by heart, in the original—or at least believe that Eliot does—whereas Berryman’s private, concealed, intertextual relationship with Dante (which the rest of this chapter will explore) does not raise the question of whether the reader has even heard of him. Eliot’s choice to present the passage solely in its original language, though not at all unusual, provides a second insight: to Eliot, Dante was his words, a master producer of the sort of verse and constructed language that appealed to the New Critical mindset. Berryman, as we will see, lifted numerous formal ideas from Dante, transforming the latter’s narrative techniques and essential topoi into the former’s modern idiom, but he does not present Dante’s poetry itself as a cultural artifact to be ogled alongside his own verse; Berryman’s Dante is a living transformation whereas Eliot’s is, with all due reverence, a museum piece. Third, and perhaps most significantly to the thesis of this chapter, Eliot’s use of Dante is selective while Berryman’s is totalizing. To Eliot, Dante is largely a source of lines and passages to be excerpted or alluded to. Although Eliot’s poems inevitably execute a transformation of Dante’s original meaning, the shade of the authentic source lingers on the

⁷¹ On this see Singleton’s commentary to XXVII.67.

⁷² All Dante translations are Charles S. Singleton’s unless otherwise noted. In Eliot, this reads “*S’io credessi che mia riposta fosse / a persona che mai tornasse al mondo, / questa fiamma staria senza più scosse. / Ma per ciò che giammai di questo fondo / non tornò vivo alcun, s’i’odo il vero, / senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo.*” *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1963), 3.

reference: both are present. But in Berryman, the idea of Dante is concealed in its transformation into Berryman's idiom. The process is influence rather than reverence, and the object is an emergent Dantean gestalt rather than a synecdochal selection.

The epigraph to "Prufrock" illustrates this clearly. First, the reference to the *Inferno* occurs in the most public part of the poem: epigraph skirts the line between text and paratext (similar in this respect, though quite different in form, to the footnotes that follow *The Waste Land*). The reader is not urged to ascribe the words to a posited lyrical consciousness or locate them diegetically, but may instead ascribe them to the real-world author, or in this case compiler, of the text. Second, the epigraph, neither translated nor attributed, is accessible only to the reader who has a working knowledge of the Italian language and who also recognizes the origin of the quotation, as though the direct experience of the language—the words themselves—is of more cultural utility than an understanding of their sense. In fact, their contribution to the reader's understanding of the poem is minimal: they do not add an additional level of irony or meaning beyond what is revealed within the text of the poem itself (lyrical speaker as repressed ego muttering a reluctant confession in a half-dead world). If anything, the joke here—for it is a joke of sorts—is the very fact that the lines do come from Dante, who is being tossed around as casually as Prufrock's women toss around Michelangelo. This illustrates the third aspect of Eliot's Dante: he is Dante with an especially capital D, a signifier of himself and his own cultural significance. The very fact that he can be boiled down to a signifier through allusion or quotation marks him as different from Berryman's Dante, whose influence is more readily present in the structure, ordering, and mechanics of the Dream Songs and seldom stands out in a particular allusion. The same dynamics are at work in Eliot's many nods toward the *Commedia* in *The*

Waste Land, where images from *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* are ironically and disjunctively extracted and transferred to the etiolated London of Eliot's infertile imagined world.

The presence of a reified Dante at the beginning of "Prufrock" allows Eliot to use him as a direct instrument toward irony, a locatable entity with direct textual agency, quite unlike Berryman's ontologically diffuse Dante, who is a quiet matrix of formal and structural precedent that underlies the Dream Songs and pushes Berryman's poetics toward a position of aesthetic novelty. Berryman himself seems to have had similar thoughts toward Eliot's Dante. In his essay "Prufrock's Dilemma," Berryman briefly addresses the role that the epigraph plays in Eliot's poem:

A knowledge of Italian is of very little help . . . One has to know who is speaking in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This is a lost soul, in Hell, damned in particular because he tried to purchase absolution before committing a crime. We are obliged to consider, that is, as of Prufrock with his dilemma of whether or not to propose marriage, whether the fundamental reason he does not do so—his sin—is his refusal to take the ordinary, inevitable human risks . . .⁷³

The essay dates from 1960—that is, the era of Berryman's career when much of the material for 77 Dream Songs had already been crafted but long before the poem coalesced into its final form. To Berryman, Eliot's Dante was both a system of specific referents—"one has to know who is speaking"—and a textual agent responsible for at least one of "Prufrock's" numerous layers of irony. It is also interesting to note the possible parallels between Eliot's anti-hero and Berryman's. Although spasmodic and neurotic Henry is a far cry from repressed and indecisive J. Alfred, Berryman's characterization of Dante's (and Eliot's) "lost soul, in Hell," who has sinned by seeking prophylactic absolution, is a meaningful antithesis to Henry, whose great sin, if any, is to be so divorced from the very idea of absolution that he does not even know to seek it.

⁷³ John Berryman, "Prufrock's Dilemma," in *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), 271.

This salvific destitution lies at the heart of the spiritual dilemma of Dream Song 28, “Snow Line,” which Berryman famously described in a 1963 Academy of American Poets reading as “a poem about a sheep . . . a lost sheep.” Referentially, biblically, one would expect the sheep to represent the saved, or even perhaps the savior. Instead, the utter destitution present in lines such as “If we could all / run, even that would be better” and “If I had to do the whole thing over again / I wouldn’t” enacts a profound gulf between the lyrical consciousness and the very idea of salvation, which does not seem to exist in the poem’s universe except through its profoundly felt absence. Moreover, the aphoristic syntax of much of the poem (“It was dark and then / it isn’t,” “I’m alone too,” “The sun is not hot,” to name but a few instances) constructs a numbed consciousness, perceiving but not cogitating, that is in direct opposition to Prufrock’s sin of excessive forethought and paralyzing deliberation. Berryman saw in Eliot’s use of Dante, and indeed throughout “Prufrock,” a spiritual foil to the mechanism of his own epic-in-progress

Finally, the discrepancy between Eliot’s and Berryman’s respective treatments of Dantean material mirrors a larger one between the two poets’ poetics, or perhaps more generally between the generation of the modernists and the generation that came to age in the shadow of, rather than invented, the New Criticism: “The presentation of sensuously immediate objects is the means, in most of Eliot’s early poems, through which the abstract moral situations of the characters and personae are communicated, and the symbol of the automatic or arrested gesture (a device at times almost kinesthetic in its workings) is used frequently in the early work to convey a sense of what Jung sees as the disintegration of personality.”⁷⁴ Fussell’s theory deals explicitly with the role of physical gestures in Eliot’s poetry, but the same logic may be applied to the role of quotation and allusion as literary deixis. In Eliot, Dante becomes a gesture, an

⁷⁴ Paul Fussell, “The Gestic Symbolism of T. S. Eliot,” *ELH* 23:3 (Sept. 1955), 196.

index, a “sensuously immediate gesture” at least to the Eliotically-well-read reader who recognizes the source and perceives the speech act as a gesture across literary epochs. Moreover, these “gestures” are indeed both “automatic,” insofar as we view them as verbal tics of an authorial voice that parallel physical tics of an intradiegetic persona, and also “arrested,” insofar as we recognize the limited degree to which they are capable of invoking even a shadow of a part of the text to which they allude—because every act of reference is an incomplete and frustrated performance of the referent work in its entirety, an aborted act of conjuring. Berryman, on the other hand, does not attempt, by means magical or otherwise, to conjure Dante directly from the murk of history. Nor, for that matter, does Berryman’s poetry rely primarily on subtleties of intimation, symbolism, or intertextual evocative gesture. The voices of Henry and his shadow companion, whether in the first person or the third, are so strongly disjunctive, and so disruptive of the fourth wall of lyrical evocation, that there exists no safe intradiegetic space in which the poet can safely confine an action for the reader’s objective contemplation. The speech acts of Berryman’s verse transcend the referential potential of the perfectly constructed verbal object valued by the New Criticism, executing in verbal gestures the sorts of maneuvers that the young Eliot, in Fussell’s reckoning, executed through symbolic, intradiegetic gestures operating across the distance of reference. Berryman’s Dante cannot occupy the same space as Eliot’s Dante—a space external to and defined by the poem’s posited, diegetic reality—because in Berryman’s poetry, no such space exists.

Berryman’s Dante, Berryman’s Epic

Dante was by far one of the most perennially significant authors in Berryman’s life as a reader. A search of Berryman’s letters reveals numerous references to Dante, in a wide variety of

contexts and over the course of myriad decades. It is also clear from the letters that Berryman took Dante very seriously. As early as 1937, at the age of 22, Berryman writes dismissively of a “faffing Australian ass” he met, who, among other damning faults, “Dislikes Blake, pretends to know Yeats, laughs much too long at his own quips, will discuss nothing less than Dante (whom he quite fails to understand, knowing only the Inferno)...”⁷⁵ The vehemence of Berryman’s tone stems partly from the poseur’s bombast, but more particularly from his pretension to a deep knowledge of an author on whom Berryman already seems to consider himself an expert. In 1945 he writes of a particularly scathing review he has just composed, “I have also torn Davenport’s poem to pieces for the next Politics. Gnash Gnash: it is the influence of Dante whom I read everyday with wonder & humility.” It is technically possible that Berryman’s claim to read Dante every day is an exaggeration, but given his reputation for the exhaustive and near-obsessive study of writers, most famously Shakespeare, we might also take Berryman at his word here, especially since only a few weeks later he bemoans the fact that the constant duties of reviewing bad books is causing him to neglect the reading and study of Dante and even goes so far as to compare himself to Cato, most likely in the latter’s role as the guardian of the entrance to Purgatory against intrusion by the damned (viz., here, bad literature).⁷⁶ The letters also reveal that in the fall and winter of 1954, around the time when the Dream Songs are being born, Berryman is teaching or preparing to teach Dante, first in the context of a humanities seminar and later as part of a medieval literature course.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Quoted from *We Dream of Honor: John Berryman’s Letters to His Mother* (New York: Norton, 1988), 88.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 215-6.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 264-283.

It would be absurd to contend that an author of such personal and professional importance to Berryman did not exert some degree of influence as Berryman began to conceive of his own modern epic. But as we have seen, Berryman's relationship with Dante was quiet and concealed, at least when compared to Eliot's ostentatious mining of Dante for quotations and allusions. The influence of Dante on Berryman does not leap off the page but lies buried in the structure of 77 Dream Songs, which follow a wandering psyche, "Henry," through dream-like transformations (or perversions) of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, aligned respectively with the first three books of *The Dream Songs*.

Outside of the text itself, the most convincing argument in favor of this interpretation of the structure of 77 Dream Songs is that Berryman had already, years previously, planned to do something very much like this. In the January 1950 issue of *Poetry* magazine, Berryman published several short excerpts of a long poem, a recently abandoned work called *The Black Book*. Taking its title from documentary reports of Nazi atrocities during World War II and the Holocaust, the book would have been an account of an actual, historical hell-on-earth to which Berryman, who turned 25 the year the Nazis invaded Poland, was, if not an eye witness, than at least a historical witness. The surviving excerpts are among Berryman's darkest work, sounding at an almost impossible remove from the pastiche and the more satirical moments of the *Dream Songs*. Ultimately, "the material was too painful for him to deal with, however, and the project was abandoned."⁷⁸ We will never know exactly what factors, psychological, professional, or aesthetic, led Berryman to abandon *The Black Book*, but the fact that the project was left incomplete does help explain the very different tone of the *Dream Songs*' more infernal

⁷⁸ Gary Q. Arpin, *The Poetry of John Berryman* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1978), 50.

moments: confronting hell face-to-face, with no mollifying transformations, simply did not appeal to the poet.⁷⁹ We do know, however, that the portrayal of some version of hell was Berryman's original intention in conceiving of *The Black Book*. The work was not intended to stand alone. Rather, it was to be merely the first part in a series of three successive long poems—the second of which was to have been *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, and the third a barely-begun work titled *Scholars at the Orchid Pavilion*—which were intended to directly mirror the structure of Dante's *Commedia*, with *The Black Book* representing the *Inferno* and the latter two representing *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* respectively.⁸⁰ When Berryman finally set out several years later to write his epic, *The Dream Songs*, these abandoned plans must have lain just distant enough in his memory to seem appealing but not confining. The particularly concentrated brilliance of 77 *Dream Songs* would be born from a set of transformations enacted on Berryman's residual ideas of what his own *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* might look like.

Yet 77 *Dream Songs* is not merely a poetic sequence influenced heavily by Dante. Nor, crucially, is it merely the first part of the larger work of which it is ostensibly a part. Time and time again Berryman insisted on the unity of the whole of *The Dream Songs* as a single entity, a modern epic in 385 small parts.⁸¹ But we have no readerly obligation to wholly agree with his

⁷⁹ Matthew Boswell speculates that Berryman's "failure to complete the volume clearly had procedural as well as psychological origins . . . Above all, Berryman's inability to settle on a definite final structure (which anticipates the trouble he would have ordering *The Dream Songs*) reflects a preoccupation with the psychology and historicity of form that may have placed internal halts on his outward ambition." Ironically, I believe that this very same preoccupation with "the historicity of form" is what allowed the *Commedia* to ultimately have such a profound but subtle effect on the structure of 77 *Dream Songs*. (Matthew Boswell, "The Black Book: John Berryman's Holocaust Requiem," in *After Thirty Falls: New Essays on John Berryman*, ed. Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 13)

⁸⁰ Haffenden, 165.

stated intentions in this respect. 77 Dream Songs, Books I-III of the complete work, not only is the part of the whole where Dante's influence is most obviously felt, but also can stand on its own as a modern epic, independent from later addition and agglutination.

To consider 77 Dream Songs as a more-or-less self-contained whole, a long poem in its own right, is no more an act of critical violence than Berryman himself was willing to commit on his beloved Whitman. Berryman writes in an essay on Whitman: "And although he [Whitman] is talking about Leaves of Grass [in his own self-criticism], in quoting him you will understand me to be referring to Song of Myself, the epitome of his book, where it stands first."⁸² 77 Dream Songs is likewise the "epitome" of its book, the point at which the poet's achievement in formal control, novelty, and emotional affect stands greatest. It is easy to argue, in fact, that 77 Dream Songs is more successful in its role as modern epic than the whole of The Dream Songs, just as A Draft of XXX Cantos or perhaps The Pisan Cantos is more successful than the whole of Pound's opus. This synecdochal triumph of the part over the whole is a natural consequence of the modern agglutinative epic, a sprawling project undertaken by a single maker executed over many years with no definite planned endpoint. Such is certainly the case with Leaves of Grass, which swelled from the slender 1855 edition to the sprawling 1892 "Death Bed" edition and would have sprawled further had the poet's death not intervened. Few readers would willingly relinquish the riches of the 1892 edition for the relative coherence of 1855 (the loss of the war poems alone would render Whitman something other than Whitman), yet there is a unity of vision in "Song of Myself" and its handful of shorter companion pieces that by 1892 has been violently sublated by the poem's ambition to embrace as much of society and the cosmos as possible. Likewise, with the publication of His Toy, His Dream, His Rest in 1968, the Dream

⁸² John Berryman, "Song of Myself: Intention and Substance," in *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), 228.

Songs bulged outward to encompass an increasingly literal world of current events and the poet's own daily activities, transferred to "Henry" with little or no transformation. Thus the "completed" work lacks the formal tightness and creative concentration of the portion that "stands first," both physically and artistically: 77 Dream Songs, published in 1964, divided into three sub-sections, and epitomizing not only the Dream Songs but also the poet's career.

Likewise, it is in sections of the modern agglutinative epic that we can most readily locate the unsquelched pulse of the ancient epic tradition. The great precedents of modern epic, Milton, Dante, Virgil, are works with overarching schemata: Milton's balanced dialectic,⁸³ Dante's Christian eschatology, Virgil's Greek forebears. One might object that "Homer" represents the agglutination of disparate material from periods far more historically disjunctive than the middle and end of a modern poet's career, but until very recently tradition had ironed the folds into a unified and apparently premeditated whole, and outside of the disciplines of philology and classical scholarship this is still largely the way Homer's epics are read today: as complete, single-author works. The same illusion could not sway even an ignorant reader of Pound's Cantos, which dematerializes into fragments and inconclusive gestures. The same can be said of Berryman's Dream Songs, although to a lesser extent: the latter portions lose their thematic cohesion and stray willy-nilly into a digressive textscape that is not the calculated and poignant disparity of 77 Dream Songs' constituent parts, but rather the less meaningful and more purely random wandering of lyric poetry pressed into a consistent form and fitted with the consistent mask of Henry. A compelling persona throughout 77 Dream Songs, Henry fades into a cipher-subject later in the Dream Songs, and one feels as though the poet is no longer crafting lyrical experience around a posited consciousness (Henry), but rather applying that

⁸³ John T. Shawcross, "The Balanced Structure of 'Paradise Lost,'" *Studies in Philology* 62:5(1965): 696-718.

consciousness like a label *ex post facto*, after the experience is crafted. For these reasons, we are justified in considering 77 Dream Songs as an epic in its own right, independent of its lengthy and diffuse continuation.

Dante's Place in the History of Epic

To understand fully the transformation that Berryman enacts on the 20th-century epic by way of Dante, however, it is important that we establish the remarkably similar transformation that Dante enacted on his own inherited tradition of Classical epic. In the first chapter of this dissertation, we saw how epic lost its ethos in the era of high modernism—that is, the element of personal character that in Homer and Virgil plays against a backdrop of mythos became subsumed by mythos itself in works such as Pound's *Cantos*. Dante's *Commedia*, 600 years earlier, also marked a radical transformation of the traditional, Aristotelian model of mythos and ethos, but in an opposite direction from the transformation we have already examined: in Dante, ethos, character, takes center stage, while the backdrop itself, the mythos of the *Commedia*, is superseded by ethos, much the same way mythos supersedes ethos in Pound's *Cantos*. This occurs through a combination of Dante's attitude toward his own place in the epic tradition, as well as the particular aspects of the Christian mythos that is the foundation of the *Commedia*'s universe.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Also relevant, though of tertiary importance here, is Dante's role as a scathing critic of contemporary political and religious institutions. His attacks of figures as significant as Pope John XXII (*Paradiso*, XVIII.127-136) are fundamentally anti-collective in their social orientation: it is not that "times" are hard, or that "the nation" has gone astray, but that particular evil men are sowing harm and disorder through unjust and sinful actions. This subversion of the highest established secular order of Western European Christianity is a further blow to the relevance and primacy of mythos in the *Commedia*. See Scott, 55-57.

Western Europe did not exactly forget Homer during the Middle Ages. Summaries of and commentaries on the *Iliad* existed in wide circulation, along with various other accounts of the Trojan War all derived from Homer's original texts, and, of course, Virgil's *Aeneid*, the literary heir and diegetic continuation of Homer's epics. However, knowledge of the Greek language was rare in the West, and the actual texts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were almost unknown even to the educated elite at least until the translation of the *Iliad* into Latin in the mid 14th century, decades after Dante's death. So although Dante, in keeping with his age, revered Homer as one of mankind's greatest poets, it is almost certain that he himself never read either of the classical Greek epics, neither directly nor even in translation.

Virgil, on the other hand, was an integral part of the literary culture of Dante's age, both as the author of the *Aeneid*, the foundation myth of the Roman Empire and therefore, indirectly, of the Italian people, but also as an alleged prophet of the birth of Christ and the founding of establishment of Christianity, according to a common medieval interpretation of the poet's fourth Eclogue.⁸⁵ We also know that Virgil and his work were of particular significance to Dante in composing the *Commedia* because it is Virgil, after all, who serves as the Dante-character's guide through Hell and Purgatory in the first two books of the *Commedia*. The two most ready explanations for this choice are that Virgil predicted the Christian epoch yet was not a part of it, and that Virgil sent Aeneas into the underworld in the *Aeneid* in order to gain knowledge, much

⁸⁵ Dante gives a catalog of important Classical poets in the *Vita nuova*. Virgil, unsurprisingly, is "in the place of honor and the only poet to be quoted twice." (Barolini, 189) More importantly, the *Commedia* is ripe with passages that allude directly to the *Aeneid*: Barolini cites Whitfield's comment that "'90 of these passages concern the Inferno, 34 the Purgatorio, and 13 the Paradiso,'" and attributes this falling-off as the *Commedia* progresses as a deliberate reminder to the reader that Dante "seems to be deliberately imitating a mode whose trappings he will gradually shed as the exigencies of his own art take over, as though to underscore the point that after joining the classical poets and becoming one of their fraternity, he will keep on going, leaving them behind." (Barolini, 201-3)

as Dante wishes to do in the *Commedia*. Yet a third important possibility exists as well: to Dante the composer of a then-modern epic, Virgil was the most revered and accessible forebear in the tradition of the form, a guide not only through an underworld and a Christian cosmology but also through a literary tradition.

And moreover, Virgil's method and goal in writing the *Aeneid* has more in common with Dante's in the *Commedia* than may be obvious at first glance. The *Aeneid* is a classic example of what Ezra Pound called "the tale of the tribe"—that is, the epic that explains the genesis and ontology of a race or culture. But as in most such nation-founding narratives, the tribe in question is in peril, its future existence uncertain. This peril only turns to potential future stability with the final slaying of Turnus by Aeneas at the end of Book XII, an individual action perpetrated for individualistic reasons that takes on vast historical importance in context. The basic motion of the plot (if not the narrative, which as in Homer's epics begins in *medias res*) moves from a position of total ruin (the Trojans defeated in their homeland) through places of sojourn and temptation (Carthage, where love tempts the hero to stay with Dido; Sicily, where some of the travel-weary Trojans attempt to burn their ships) to a final place of safety and security (the banks of the Tiber, where the Trojans secure the land that will be Rome). The parallels between this structure and that of Dante's *Commedia* are concealed at the surface level of the two texts, but nonetheless deep and integral. Where the survival of the tribe is at stake in the *Aeneid*, the salvation of the individual is at stake in the *Commedia*. And like Aeneas and his Trojans, Dante (the character) begins in a state of near destitution in the opening of *Inferno*, proceeds to a condition of suspension and uncertainty in *Purgatorio*, and attains the intimation of a state of saving grace only at the conclusion of *Paradiso*. At its heart, the salvation of the tribe differs little from the salvation of the individual. Dante recognized the key to continuing the

tradition of the Classical epic in the late Middle Ages, the crucial transformations that would allow a pagan form to exist in a Christian milieu: every epic narrative is a salvation narrative, at least insofar as it anticipates the birth of the cultural and political present from the chaos and strife of the past.

At the same time, the *Commedia* differs radically from the *Aeneid* in its deployment and treatment of ethos. Certainly, both epics are littered with characters of all sorts, but the idea of character itself takes on a fundamental significance in Dante that it had neither in the *Aeneid* nor in Homer. This is due first to the *Commedia*'s unique temporality, and second to its Christian worldview. In spite of its title and its multidimensional protagonist, the *Aeneid* is not solely the story of Aeneas: it is the story of the birth of the Roman nation. While Aeneas's fate lurks uncertain in the diegetic future—when we read of his decision to abandon Dido and Carthage, or of his final battle with Turnus—the aspect of the story that revolves around his personal fate is overshadowed by the certainty of events lying in the historical past: Rome was founded; the Romans did flourish (and, to the contemporary reader, were flourishing still). Ethos is in flux, but mythos—the mythos of the tribe—lies soundly underneath it, a known quantity. In the *Commedia*, the fate of Dante (the character) is just as uncertain as Aeneas's fate, but on a different temporal plane. As he is never really at risk of being, say, slain in battle, Dante's crisis—divine judgment—comes at a future time that exceeds the bounds of the text. The beatific vision that concludes the *Paradiso* is the intimation of salvation, not salvation itself.

More importantly, the “tribe” of which the *Commedia* is the tale—mankind, or at least medieval Christendom—faces a soteriological future as uncertain as Rome's past is secure. Even if a contemporary reader were to commit the heinous misprision of treating the *Commedia* as a mere manual for salvation, the success of the individual soul in achieving Dante's purpose

remains uncertain.⁸⁶ Through this dynamic, the text siphons emphasis away from the determinate mythos of the collective Christian past and places it instead on the indeterminate ethos of the individual soul. This not only marks Dante's epic as significantly different from Virgil's in its basic ordering, but also separates it from previous medieval Christian epics, such as the *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300), which looks backwards toward the scriptural and historical past—the collective “tale of the tribe”—rather than forwards toward the individual future.⁸⁷ Dante's cosmology is essentially a cosmology of the human soul. The *Commedia* instills in the reader a sense that the even the most important cosmological moments in the mythos on which it draws—Creation, the Fall, the Incarnation, the Passion—directly involve or happen for the sake of the human soul.⁸⁸ The whole of the *Commedia* is, in essence, an extrapolation of the effects and potential benefits of these mythological events for the future of a single character, Dante, and, by extension, for the future of any individual or the future of a set that, at its maximum extent, potentially includes all

⁸⁶ Yeats was of the opinion that Dante himself—the poet, that is, not the character—could not have wholly succeeded in the soteriological purpose of his contemplative poetic journal, stating in *A Vision* that “. . . in all great poetical styles there is saint or hero, but when it is all over Dante can return to his chambering . . . They sought no impossible perfection but when they handled paper or parchment.” Quoted in Stephen Paul Ellis, “Yeats and Dante,” *Comparative Literature* 33:1 (Winter, 1981), 4.

⁸⁷ Some medieval thinkers read Virgil this way as well. John of Salisbury in the 1100s suggested a reading of books I-VI of the *Aeneid* as representing “the six periods of life . . . the origin and progress of man.” Thus Dante can be seen as pushing back against not only the original epics of the late middle ages, but also that age's inherited interpretations of Virgil. See Thompson, 21-22.

⁸⁸ An interesting counterpoint to this is offered by Raffa, who suggests that in Dante's view, the Incarnation was something of a double-edged sword, responsible not merely for the salvation of part of mankind, but also for the particularly gruesome punishments endured in Hell by unredeemed sinners. This inversion of theology may be seen as a predecessor to Berryman's own inversions of many of Dante's topoi and tropes in the *Dream Songs*. Raffa, 23.

individuals but does not reduce them to a collective identity.⁸⁹ The idea of Pound's "tribe" is thoroughly subsumed by ethos.⁹⁰

It is no wonder, then, that Berryman turned to Dante as a partial model for his own epic in writing *The Dream Songs*. As we will see, the *Dream Songs* commit a similar transformation of their immediate historical forbearers. What Dante did with the Virgilian tradition, Berryman does with the Poundian tradition. But while Dante found in Virgil an Aristotelian balance between a backdrop of mythos and ethos playing against it, Pound's radical overemphasis of mythos provided Berryman with an even more contrarian forbearer to push against. In creating his own original poetics of epic, Dante proved a powerful ally.

The Dantean Schema of the Dream Songs

Although Berryman's poetic voice in the *Dream Songs*, with its unprecedented mixture of linguistic registers, dialects, and poetic traditions, is uniquely his own, some of the most fundamental structural elements of the *Dream Songs* can be read as borrowings from Dante's *Commedia*. The curious reader or thorough biographer is free to speculate to what extent these borrowings were deliberate or unconscious. Either way, they undoubtedly helped shape the *Dream Songs* into what they are—Berryman's solution to the problem of modern epic. They

⁸⁹ Dante himself explained the *Commedia* in similar terms, saying that its purpose was "to remove the living in this life from a state of woe, and to lead (them) through to a state of happiness" (*removere vivantes in hac vita de statu miseriae et perducere ad statum felicitatis*, from *Epistola XIII*, quoted in Stephen Paul Ellis, "Yeats and Dante," *Comparative Literature* 33:1 (Winter, 1981), 4.

⁹⁰ In Quinones's view, theology—a collective, mythos-based understanding of the world—is of primary importance to Dante only insofar as it remains comprehensible and useful, after which "ethical conduct and practical effect" become more important in governing a person's actions and choices. This paints Dante as a sort of proto-Humanist, deeply concerned with the ethos of the individual. See Quinones, 134-5.

emerged from a mind that was, as we have seen, thoroughly saturated with the *Commedia* both through teaching and through personal devotion to the text. The most obvious trace of Dante's influence is, as I have mentioned, the tripartite structure of 77 Dream Songs, and we will soon explore the particularly Dantean aspects and direct parallels between Books I, II, and III of The Dreams Songs and the three stages of Dante's afterlife, but other more general parallels link the two texts as well.

In both a literal and a spiritual sense, the *Commedia* is a journey, on the one hand a physical trek through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, and on the other hand a progression of the soul from an endangered state at the beginning of *Inferno* to a state of grace and possible salvation at the end of *Paradiso*. However, viewed in either sense, it is not a journey that Dante the character can complete within the confines of the poem. Physically, Dante's pilgrimage ends with his arrival at the celestial rose, where he is granted a glimpse of the Eternal Light, a divine image of the creator. However, the result is not an instantly salvific union with God, but merely the intimation of that union. Dante ends in a bliss that is not tempered by, but co-extant with, an awareness of his own human inadequacy. The ending of *Paradiso* is worth quoting here at length:

“As is the geometer who wholly applies himself to measure the circle, and finds not, in pondering, the principle of which he is in need, such was I at that new sight. I wished to see how the image conformed to the circle and how it has its place therein; but my own wings were not sufficient for that, save that my mind was smitten by a flash wherein its wish came to be.”⁹¹

⁹¹ Par. XXXIII.131-141: “Qual è ’l geometra che tutto s’affige / per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova, / pensando, quel principio ond’ elli indige, / tal era io a quella vista nova: / veder voleva come si convenne / l’imago al cerchio e come vi s’indova; / ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne: / se non che la mia mente fu percossa / da un fulgore in che sua voglia venne.”

The “flash” by which Dante’s mind is “smitten” is the intimation of understanding without the complete achievement of understanding, which, it is implied, cannot occur in life to an ordinary mortal. Spiritually, Dante quite explicitly says, in *Purgatorio*, that the current journey is only a sort of practice round that Dante must pass through in order to qualify to make the journey (minus Hell, presumably) a second time, after death. In response to a question from one of the dead, Dante explains, “from within the woeful places I came this morning, and I am in my first life, albeit by this my journeying I gain the other.”⁹² Thus the spiritual purpose of the journey cannot be fulfilled by the journey itself. This theme and poetics of the unattainable is, as we will soon see, an integral part of Berryman’s *Dream Songs* as well, which draw their spiritual energy from the irreconcilability of messy human life with the higher order of the universe, and which delight in intimations of various heavens and havens, more often than not at a painfully untraversable remove.

The second key structural element that Berryman draws from the *Commedia* is the omnipresent sidekick. Dante has his Virgil, a shade in the outermost circle of Hell who has been given divine leave to accompany Dante as far as the gates of heaven. Likewise, in a bizarre transformation of the nobility of a Virgil, Berryman’s Henry has the mysterious interlocutor whom I will call the shadow companion. Though he appears only sporadically and is never identified, the shadow companion plays a part in *The Dream Songs* as integral as the part that Virgil plays in the *Commedia*. He gets Henry in and out of trouble, helps him forget and remember his problems and himself, and generally serves as a guide through the tribulations of the unreal dream world that Berryman creates for Henry to get lost in. Though he differs

⁹² *Pur.* VIII.58-60: “...per entro i luoghi tristi / venni stamane, e sono in prima vita, / ancor che l’altra, sì andando, acquisti.”

drastically in tone from Dante's Virgil, the idea of the shadow companion in Berryman may well have sprung from his thorough and frequent perusal of the *Commedia*.

Then Came a Departure: Berryman's *Inferno*

In a sense, Hell is Henry's natural environment. An archetypal tortured soul—tortured almost to comedic excess, as Berryman enjoys a touch of sadism over his creation—Hell is the state from which Henry will never really escape. However, perhaps because it suits him so well, or he it, it is also not as bad a place as Dante's. In Book I of *77 Dreams Songs*, sins and their eternal punishments are the very matter of which a life is made. The book is a clear homage to *Inferno*, but crucially, it is not the sort of direct tribute or modern rewriting that Walcott would later make out of Homer's *Iliad* in *Omeros*. The book does, as we will see, take direct structural nods from Dante, but on the whole what Berryman borrows, and in borrowing transforms, is the *mise en scène* of Dante's hell. Just as *Inferno* acts as an externalization and a showcase of the classic sins of Christianity, so Book I of *77 Dream Songs* acts as a phantasmagoria of sins, both exaggerating and recasting them in an amoral universe in which damnation seems to be nothing less, or more, than the preordained and permanent state of the poetic consciousness.

77 Dream Songs begins with a spiritual crisis. Whether the first Dream Song represents the end of childhood innocence, the inception of conscious awareness, a father's suicide, or any other such serious cognitive change, it is clear that something dramatic, life-changing, and probably not good has happened to Henry:

Huffy Henry hid the day,
unappeasable Henry sulked.
I see his point,—a trying to put things over.
It was the thought that they thought
they could do it made Henry wicked & away.
But he should have come out and talked. (DS1)

The tone of the lines is more tragicomic than infernal. If we are in Hell, it is an unusually lighthearted variation on the theme. But we should remember that Dante himself did not begin in Hell. Rather, *Inferno* starts in an unspecified location brimming with potential significance but revealing little about itself other than the dark spiritual state associated with it: “Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost.” And a little further on: “I cannot say how I entered it, I was so full of sleep at the moment I left the true way...”⁹³ The peculiar lack of specificity in the latter passage sounds as a peculiar reverse echo of Berryman’s vague complaint of “a trying to put things over” and “the thought that they thought / they could do it.” Both poets begin their epics with a character experiencing some grave but unspecified spiritual crisis. More importantly, the diegetic solution to the crisis is the same in both cases: the hero must descend into the underworld.

Dante’s Hell is, of course, a fairly literal one, a place of increasingly creative torments for increasingly sinful souls. Additionally, it is not only the most familiar part of the *Commedia* (as Berryman reminds us in his complaint against the “faffing Australian ass” of 1937), but also the simplest to follow both conceptually and narratively. It is essentially paratactic in its structure, consisting of a chain of encounters leading ultimately to the arrival at the frozen Satan of the deepest circle and the subsequent climb through the Earth to the shores of Purgatory. It is unsurprising, then, that Berryman’s transformation of *Inferno* in Book I of 77 Dream Songs should be paratactic as well, consisting largely of a chain of discrete poems arranged together

⁹³ Inf. I.1-3 & 10-12: “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, / che la diritta via era smarrita.” &: “Io non so ben ridir com’ i’ v’intraï, / tant’ era pien di sonno a quel punto / che la verace via abbandonai.”

like Boschian grotesqueries to form a hideously varied whole held together largely by its own diversity.

Line 9 of DS1 could easily serve as the title of the poem: “Then came a departure.” The world is somehow, suddenly, horribly shattered, the subject—Henry—thrown into a state of turmoil that resembles the spiritual “dark wood” of Dante’s opening. But the words are also an incipit of a more literal sort: the announcement of the beginning of a journey in which the disorienting effects of distance take hold almost immediately, just as Dante is thrown into confusion immediately upon entering Hell. At the beginning of Canto III of *Inferno*, Dante contemplates the words inscribed over the entrance to Hell, including the well-known “Abandon every hope, you who enter.”⁹⁴ Almost immediately he turns to Virgil for aid and clarification, as the meaning of the words eludes his understanding: “Master,” he says, “their meaning is hard for me.”⁹⁵ Likewise, the first lines of DS2 resist readerly comprehension through their mixture of linguistic registers and the speaker’s literal failure to comprehend the situation:

The jane is zoned! no nightspot here, no bar
there, no sweet freeway, and no premises
for business purposes,
no loiterers or needers. Henry are
baffled. Have ev’ybody head for Maine,
utility-man take a train?

(DS2)

If this is where Henry’s “departure” has led him, it is a place every bit as frightening and incomprehensible as the gates of Dante’s Hell. The reader should find the language, the diction, and the tone profoundly disorienting even after the strange, disjunctive music of Dream Song 1. This is chaos of a new variety, an urban and social conundrum to rival the unhinged psychology

⁹⁴ Inf. I.9: “Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate.”

⁹⁵ Inf. I.12: “Maestro, il sensolor m’è duro.”

of the previous poem. “The jane is zoned” alone has sent many a reader scrambling to the dictionary and skulking back again empty-handed. However, the really significant feature of this passage is that Henry himself is confused. Like Dante the character, Henry has journeyed slightly onward from his initial crisis only to find an incomprehensible world. Drink is unattainable; the bars are closed; drinkers—that is, familiar, worldly companions—have all fled away. The strangeness of the scene, the starkness and ironic otherworldliness of it, resonate strongly with the shock of Dante upon entering Hell.

Moreover, Dream Song 2 features the first of many appearances by the shadow companion, whose role in guiding Henry toward some sort of orientation serves a purpose similar to Virgil’s explication of the gates of Hell in *Inferno*:

—Sir Bones, or Galahad: astonishin
yo legal & yo good. Is you feel well?
Honey dusk do sprawl.

(DS2)

Here the shadow companion is looking after Henry—making sure that he is all right amid the chaos, perhaps comforting him with a poetic image of an urban dusk. At the same time, phrases such as “astonishin / yo legal & yo good” do not exactly provide the calm assurance that Virgil weaves for Dante. Rather, they feed into the neuroses of the Dream Songs and their central character, both sustaining and perverting the trope of the knowledgeable companion.

Dream Song 4 is thoroughly grounded not only in the infernal *mise en scène*, but also in the specific sin of lust, beginning a long progression of poems throughout Book I that (as we shall see) roughly mirror the progression of sins associated with each concentric circle of hell. (Lust also governs DS3, “A Stimulant for an Old Beast.”) DS4 begins:

Filling her compact & delicious body
with chicken páprika, she glanced at me

twice.
Fainting with interest, I hungered back
and only the fact of her husband & four other people
kept me from springing on her [. . .]
(DS4)

The scene, a crowded restaurant, teems with people, mostly unnamed, just as most scenes of *Inferno* teem with the tortured bodies of the damned. Even the red color of the food takes on an infernal tint. The text nearly bursts at the seams with sex and hunger, and the natural appeal of both appetites is squelched by the neurotic guilt that Henry seems to feel in the situation, just as Dante goes out of his way to devise for his characters torments so graphic that their sins, no matter how interesting, do not seem particularly tempting. The poem ends with a comment by the shadow companion that further emphasizes the threat of judgment and punishment:

Where did it all go wrong? There ought to be a law against Henry.
—Mr. Bones: there is.

But perhaps the most significant element of the poem is its almost compulsive scopophilia. Just as the readerly pleasure of *Inferno* lies largely in the visual images that Dante constructs of his many devious punishments (for pleasure in the punishments themselves would be a most un-Dantean sentiment), so Henry derives both his pleasure and his erotic pain from the act of looking, a dynamic that not only reinforces the phantasmagoria trope that governs the book, but also places Henry in the position of epic reader, the primary observer of his own tale.

Gluttony appears as an important concept in DS8, a horrible dissection of the bodily subject that ends with the unfortunately memorable line “They took away his crotch.” The governing theme of dismemberment and emasculation is an obviously Dantean punishment, but what exactly it is a punishment for lies concealed slightly beneath the poem’s surface. Through its formulaic repetition of syntax and its matrix-like structure, consciously or not, the poem

echoes the experimental structure of Wallace Stevens's "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," which likewise employs variations on aesthetic images reimagined in increasingly complex language. Berryman's transformations occur more quickly—they must, given the limited form of the Dream Songs—but the progression of the opening sentence of each of the three stanzas, from "The weather was fine" to "The weather was very fine" to "The weather fleured," seems all at once to be mocking Stevens the aesthete, Stevens the experimenter, and Stevens the Francophile. The sin here, aligning complexly with Dante's conception of gluttony, is nothing less than the sin of complacent poetic aestheticism, perhaps with a quick swipe at imagism along the way. Whether Henry's horrible emasculation occurs because of or in spite of all these nice words about the weather is unclear, but the poem does act as a harsh judge of its own ironically invested tone. In either case, the mechanism is once again highly visual, and we are left with the impression that we have witnessed a nightmare.

In DS13 and DS14, we can easily located Greed, manifest not as the traditional avarice for money or power but in a smaller, more personalized form: the unchecked and dissatisfied desire for a life better than the one the subject is living. This manifests itself as boredom, a complex spiritual state that involves a numbness of the spirit but also a profound and insatiable desire with no clear object. DS13 begins with an ironic evocation of the allegedly ideal life that Henry is living:

God bless Henry. He lived like a rat,
with a thatch of hair on his head
in the beginning.

(DS13)

But the grandiloquence of "God bless Henry" descends quickly into the near-despair of a generic man with no properties or qualities of his own:

So may be Henry was a human being.
Let's investigate that.
. . . We did; okay.

There is nothing here to be said of Henry; his very identity is nullified, refuted, seemingly by an external force of divine significance. "God's Henry's enemy," we learn several lines later—not a benefactor, but an antagonist. Henry's greed for an existence exceeding the God-given governs the poem and brings the shadow companion to pronounce an ominous judgment:

. . . —Mr Bones,
as I look on the saffron sky,
you strikes me as ornery.

"Ornery" replaces greed here—stubbornness stands in for insatiability. Worse still grows this spiritual affliction in the following poem, which begins:

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
we ourselves flash and yearn,
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatedly) 'Ever to confess you're bored
means you have no

Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.

(DS14)

The rejection of aesthetic beauty here is not the gluttonous mockery of DS8, but rather a sad lament for its insufficiency. It is a desire without an object—not a desire for something more, but rather a desire to be pleased. The element of insatiability is what aligns these poems of boredom so closely with the sin of greed; they form an integral part of the landscape of Henry's native torments.

Anger seethes through DS16, both anger toward the self and the general idea of a hateful world. "Henry's pelt was put on sundry walls," the poem begins, a phantasmagorical nightmare

punishment imagined within and projected violently back onto Henry's consciousness. The imagined scene is a disturbing one in which dilettantes at a cocktail party admire Henry's flesh and fur as though it were art on the wall. The strange twist at the beginning of stanza three, though—"Collect in the cold depths barracudas"—reimagines the scene as one in which rage reigns supreme, and the reader is forced to see the partygoers not as passive, unengaged admirers of pseudo-art (one might think of Eliot's women "talking of Michelangelo"), but as vicious antagonists, hateful manifestations of Henry's own consciousness engaging in a sadistic variation on the scopophilia that Henry himself applies to less gruesome scenarios of sexual longing. In the end the beings are wholly dehumanized and capable only of deceit: "Two daiquiris / withdrew into a corner of the gorgeous room / and one told the other a lie."

Likewise, Heresy can be found in DS20, "The Secret of Wisdom," which philosophically concludes "We hear the more / sin has increast, the more / grace has been caused to abound." As an out-of-context quotation from the Christian Bible (Romans 5:20), the doctrine is almost, yet horribly far from, orthodox, and the reader can hear Henry the heretic straining to justify his own self-inflicted hellish state through perverse reasoning. Violence appears in DS21 and DS22, both in the suicidal temptation toward death as Henry, "Appalled: by all the dead," broods and reflects on a siren's call toward self-destruction:

In a madhouse heard I an ancient man
 tube-fed who had not said for fifteen years
 (they said) one canny word,
 senile forever, who a heart might pierce,
 mutter 'O come on down. O come on down.'
 Clear whom he meant.

(DS21)

and also in the overtly Dantean form of blasphemy, a violence against true teaching that in DS22, "Of 1826," takes the form of scathing irreverence toward America's patriotic self-realization as

John Adams's famous deathbed cry, "Thomas Jefferson still lives," is declared to be "in vain, in vain, in vain," trumped by the final loud shout of "I am Henry Pussy-cat! My whiskers fly." This is no blasphemy less than the individual subverting the American myth and asserting his own dominance. It is a cry of the triumph of psyche over history, and another brick in the wall of Henry's self-made hell as neurosis and sin prevent him from meaningful communion with the mythos of the nation.

Fraud and treachery are dealt with in the final poems of Book I. DS23, "The Lay of Ike," continues the anti-American blaspheming of DS22 while bleeding into the territory of fraud by specifically enumerating the sins of the nation's president, father-figure, and surrogate divinity, Eisenhower. DS24, concerning Berryman's visit to India, sarcastically undermines the myth of academia and accuses Henry himself of a version of fraud in the very execution of his profession:

Oh servant Henry lectured till
the crows commenced and then
he bulbed his voice & lectured on some more.

(DS24)

The droning feel not only of the lines but of their implied action suggests that Henry the professor may be on and on about nothing at all, and the stark contrast between the lecturing and the (distastefully Orientalist) glimpse of something approaching true wisdom among the landscape and the natives, though it offers a hint of saving grace, further damns Henry the fraudulent lecturer:

The mad sun rose though on the ghats
& the saddhu in maha mudra, the great River,

and Henry was happy & beside himself with excitement.
Beside himself, his possibilities;
salaaming hours of a half-blind morning

while the rainy lepers salaamed back,
smiles & a passion of theirs & his eyes flew
in feelings not ever accorded solely to oneself.

It is in the final poem of the book, though, DS26, that Henry's final sin is captured in excruciating detail. We are in the lowest circle now, the circle of Treachery—and whom, of course, would Henry betray but himself? The poem acts not only as an accusation of self-betrayal but also as a sort of summa or recapitulation of all the preceding sins:

The glories of the world struck me, made me aria, once.
—What happen then, Mr Bones?
if be you cares to say.
Henry. Henry became interested in women's bodies,
his loins were & were the scene of stupendous achievement.
Stupor. Knees, dear. Pray.

(DS26)

Far from the triumphant escape from the bottom of Hell that Dante and Virgil execute after passing by the body of Satan himself, Henry here must confront the body of Henry himself, his own betrayer. Worse, there is no way out of this hell but merely a recapitulation of the means by which it was entered in the first place: “—What happen then, Mr Bones? / —I had a most marvellous piece of luck. I died.” The “departure” of DS1 comes back again at the end of DS26, literalized and granted the uncanny ability to launch poor Henry back again into his own endless cycle of phantasmagorical torments. Fortunately, though—as is the way with dreams, and with epics—the text carries on, the narrative progresses forward, and stasis, even the comfortable stasis of a familiar hell, is not permitted.

Against the Innocent Stars: Berryman's Purgatorio

Fittingly for a work so concerned with inversions and perversions, Book II of 77 Dream Songs begins almost exactly where Dante's Purgatorio ends: with a glimpse of an unattainable earthly paradise. Berryman's Dream Song 27 begins:

The greens of the Ganges delta foliate.
Of heartless youth made late aware he pled:
Brownies, please come.
To Henry in his sparest times sometimes
the little people spread, & did friendly things;
then he was glad.

(DS27)

The tone is immediately recognizable as one of lost innocence, of a post-lapsarian state in which the chthonic beings of a childhood's imaginings—brownies and sprites and elves of an unspecified variety—have entirely vanished.⁹⁶ The vision of the Ganges delta is glimpsed from the tragic remove of an airplane passing over it ("All the green lives / of the great delta, hours, hurt his migrant heart / in a safety of the steady 'plane"). Through the juxtaposition of sight and memory, the spatial distance and unattainability of the paradisiacal delta melds together with the temporal and psychological distance and unattainability of the brownies and the little people, conjuring a tragic sketch of a lost spiritual Eden. The inhumanly mechanistic setting of the moving airplane only furthers the impression that nature and the origin of Man—or the origin of the psyche—are irretrievably distant.

Dante, at the end of his journey through Purgatory, arrives at the literal Eden. It is a place remarkably similar in its description to Berryman's Ganges delta: "Eager now to search within

⁹⁶ It is possible—likely, even, given Berryman's racial irreverence—that "brownies" refers also to the people of India, here again (as in DS24) elevated to a trans-human state of innocence and wisdom in a distastefully Orientalist turn—but I prefer to read them as elf-like sprites, a meaning that I have no doubt is at least also present in the text.

and round about the divine forest green and dense, which tempered the new day to my eyes, without waiting longer I left the bank, taking the level ground very slowly over the soil that everywhere gives forth fragrance.”⁹⁷ The double greeniness of the image is common to Dante and Berryman: “forest green and dense [with foliage],” with an adjective supporting the color, corresponds neatly to “greens of the Ganges delta foliate,” where the verb supports the color. An overall comparison between the two passages, however, reveals an ironic and tragic disconnect between Dante’s experience and Henry’s: while Dante is free to move about on foot slowly, deliberately, savoring the sights and smells of Eden, Henry must experience his glimpse of paradise at a great distance and with sensory input from nothing other than the eyes. The experience of fragrant soil is inconceivable through the mechanic remove and breakneck speeds of air travel.

There is, however, a saving irony in the second stanza of DS27:

All the green lives
of the great delta, hours, hurt his migrant heart
in a safety of the steady ’plane. Please, please
come.

For Dante, Eden lies just before the threshold of Paradise. Beyond it lies salvation. Within it, Dante will finally experience an intimation of reunion with Beatrice, the embodiment of his spiritual longing. For Berryman, however, the thought of the verdant texture of this Eden and the spiritual revelations and fulfillments it might contain is too much to handle. The airplane is not only a vehicle of separation but also one of safety, and though the speaker desperately bids the imagined, pure, asocial beings to “please, please / come” (note the strength of the enjambment),

⁹⁷ Pur. XXVIII.1-6: “Vago già di cercar dentro e dintorno / la divina foresta spessa e viva, / ch’a li occhi temperava il novo giorno, / senza più aspettar, lasciai la riva, / prendendo la campagna lento lento / su per lo suol che d’ogne parte auliva.”

in the end the speaker considers accepting the disconnect between his own mortality and the quasi-immortality of the “little people”:

My friends,—he has been known to mourn,—I’ll die;
live you, in the most wild, kindly, green
partly forgiving wood,
sort of forever and all those human sings
close not your better ears to, while good Spring
returns with a dance and a sigh.

Though the imagery here evokes the topos of the enchanted, interstitial greenwood of Shakespearean drama, the playful wording of “partly forgiving wood” and “sort of forever” makes sense only if we view the poem’s green delta as a transformation of Eden. But the poem is still haunted by several unsettled questions. “Pleased, at the worst, except with man,” “has been known to mourn,” the equivocation of “partly forgiving” and “sort of forever,” and of course the poem’s pride of place at the beginning of Book II, all suggest that Berryman’s Purgatory will concern itself with the unsettled spiritual question of how to deal with the pains and displeasures of human existence even though the speaker has attained some degree of contentment and peace with respect to matters of immortality and transcendence (Eden, brownies).

Berryman returns to this not-wholly-satisfying comfort with the transcendent in DS51, the final poem of Book II, which begins with a lengthy apology for being human and vulnerable:

Our wounds to time, from all the other times,
sea-times slow, the times of galaxies
fleeing, the dwarfs’ dead times,
lessen so little that if here in his rude rimes
Henry them mentions, do not hold it, please,
for a putting of man down.

(DS51)

The smallness of the human condition is here pitched against the enormous backdrop of the cosmos. Again, the poem finds comfort in the stasis of the eternal, but again it is a comfort that

gives satisfaction only at the widest cognitive angle, incapable of providing full solace for “our wounds” and the other pained minutia of the human condition. In “sea-times slow” and “the times of galaxies / fleeing” we might read an imagic echo of the opening of Canto I of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, which likewise begins with myriad images of the sea and the stars, starting with the opening simile of the poet’s mind as a ship at sea—“To course over better waters the little bark of my genius now hoists her sails, leaving behind her a sea so cruel”⁹⁸—and continuing onward through increasingly detailed images of “the fair planet that prompts to love”⁹⁹ and “four stars never seen before save by the first people.”¹⁰⁰ Additionally, an image of the stars (“stelle”) in general, a multivalenced symbol of redemption, appears at the close of each of the three books of the *Commedia*; stars are integral to the fabric of Dante’s work. Here, at the close of Berryman’s *Purgatory*, they appear not only as the “galaxies fleeing” of lines 2-3, but more immediately at the end of the second stanza:

who’ll tell your fortune, when you have confessed
 whose & whose woundings—against the innocent stars
 & remorseless seas—

The separation of the final clause by dashes makes it tricky to parse. Either it is part of an enigmatic verbal construction “to confess against,” or it simply provides a glimpse of the cosmic background to “whose & whose woundings,” a reiteration of the poem’s opening stanza but with additional disjunctive force in place of tenderly cultivated grammar. “Against” also suggests a certain degree of antagonism. The “innocent stars” become the embodiment of the same spiritual

⁹⁸ Pur. I.1-3, “Per correr miglior acque alza le vele / omai la navicella del mio ingegno, / che lascia dietro a sé mar sì crudele.”

⁹⁹ Pur. I.19, “Lo bel pianeto che d’amar conforta.”

¹⁰⁰ Pur. I.23-24, “...quattro stelle / non viste mai fuor ch’a la prima gente.”

gesture that the “brownies” and “little people” were in DS27, the accepted but problematic and ultimately ineffective non-human element in the universe that is unable to help suffering Henry through his torments. This is a profound and ironic reversal of Dante’s use of the stars as signs of spiritual redemption: to end on such a note would be a direct homage to Dante, but also a direct attack on his spiritual cosmology.

But the poem does not end there. Berryman’s Purgatory closes with a stanza of peculiar dialogue, possibly between Henry and his familiar shadow-companion, but between two anonymous speakers whose identities are unlabeled and unimportant:

—Are you radioactive, pal? —Pal, radioactive.
—Has you the night sweats & the day sweats, pal?
—Pal, I do.
—Did your gal leave you? —What do you think, pal?
—Is that thing on the front of your head what it seems to be, pal?
—Yes, pal.

Coming off of the moving and beautiful image of the “innocent stars” and the “remorseless seas,” this demotic tough-guy chit-chat disturbs the reader and focuses attention sharply on the poem’s final stanza. But this turn, so startling in Berryman, mirrors quite closely the transition, in the last few cantos of Purgatorio, away from the physical aspects of the Garden of Eden and onto the redemptive dialogue between Dante and Beatrice, which occupies most the remainder of the poem. In Berryman’s transformation, however, the redemptive lover has been changed into a hip and anonymous interlocutor. Divine love has been replaced by absurd repetitions of “pal.” And worst of all, the idea of redemption—Dante’s Beatrice prepares him to cross the threshold into Heaven—has been replaced with a variety of modern plagues, from “radioactive” (the distillation of Cold War anxiety) to “the night sweats & the day sweats” (diseases, respectively, of the mind and of the spirit, with “day sweats” probably referring to a general state of early

1960s paranoia), to the mysterious “thing on the front of your head,” a sinister and unspecified stigma that seems to betoken anything but redemption. The way out of Berryman’s Purgatory is forward. The way is open, but Henry the sinner will exit unabsolved, unchanged.

Making Ready to Move On: Berryman’s Paradiso

And what paradise can follow? It is impossible to imagine the narrative of 77 Dream Songs arriving at an uncomplicatedly redemptive conclusion. First, to do so would make the continuation of the poem a tricky business, aborting the forward momentum of a character eternally driven by the dynamism of contradiction and spiritual strife. Second, an ending too purely good would clash unproductively with the general tone of squalor and discontent that holds the work together. Finally, to espouse belief in some actual Heaven or efficacious salvation after presenting perverted and distorted variations on the themes of Hell and Purgatory would upend the work’s relation to Dante’s *Commedia*, admixing an element of uncomplicated homage with the ironic reaction that governs the rest of the work. This makes Book III of 77 Dream Songs the most delicately conceived section of all, at least with respect to its Dantean precedent. As we have seen, Berryman spends Book I imagining a lawless Hell of misrule in which sins are ambiguously conceived and largely unpunished, and Book II imagining an ineffective Purgatory that leaves the soul untransformed. But what does it mean to have a Heaven that doesn’t function as it “should”—and how can the poet distort a spiritual state that is defined by its purity and permanence, except by negating it completely and constructing a situation more despondent even than Berryman’s fairly entertaining Hell and therefore unrecognizably disconnected with the very idea of Heaven?

The solution Berryman comes to seems like the only possible, or at least the best, solution to this challenging set of questions: Book III organizes itself around a series of failed heavens, each one ontologically secure but either unsatisfying or inaccessible to Henry, who ultimately obtains an ambiguous sort of salvation only by rejecting, or by moving on from, the very idea of salvation. The relationship to Dante here is not strictly intertextual, as the book relies even less than the previous two on allusions and *mise en scène* echoes. Rather, the book is a reaction to Dante's idea of heaven, and particularly the place of such a heaven within the arc of an epic poem. Poetically, it is also a study in conclusions, as 77 Dream Songs hunts to balance a sense of satisfactory arrival with the unresolved and irresolvable tension that characterizes the poem as a whole.

It is fitting, then, that Book III should begin by diametrically inverting the sentiment that opens Dante's *Paradiso*: "The glory of the All-Mover penetrates through the universe and reglows in one part more, and in another less. I have been in the heaven that most receives of His light..."¹⁰¹ While Dante bathes in the light of the Creator, Berryman begins Dream Song 52: "Bright-eyed & bushy-tailed woke not Henry up." The transformation deals a double-blow to Dante: first, because Henry's experience of the world differs so greatly from Dante's that it is hard to mistake it for any sort of paradise, and second, because even through its negative syntax, the poem when read against Dante manages to reduce the beatific luminance of *Paradiso* to the phrase "bright-eyed & bushy-tailed," a cliché usually reserved for the obnoxiously giddy who do require neither coffee nor alarm clock. The glory of the All-Mover has been exchanged for the rhetoric of the trivial, the sublimity of Dante's verse for a cloying Americanism.

¹⁰¹ Par. I.1-5: "La gloria di colui che tutto move / per l'universo penetra, e risplende / in una parte più e meno altrove. / Nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende / fu' io..."

The following scene is significant not merely because it is not heaven, but because it continues the act of strong negation begun by the first line: this locus non amoenus functions through negation rather than absence, painting a dark double of a desirable place rather than merely outlining badness. The central presence in the poem is a sinister and mysterious vise, a mechanical and inhuman object that can be read as a symbol of instrumentality over art, the machine over the body, or confinement over freedom, or as the threat of blunt and horrible castration haunting Henry's tortured, father-deprived, and recently-hospitalized psyche. Alongside these symbolic interpretations, of course, is the mere presence of the object itself, literal, incongruous, absurd and therefore almost comedic:

Bright though upon his workshop shone a vise
central, moved in
while he was doing time down hospital
and growing wise.
He gave it the worst look he had left.

(DS52)

There is a sadly emasculated note in "worst look he had left," as though all Henry Pussycat's power to spit at and scold the world were drained away. Most significant, though, is the location of the vise, "central" in his "workshop"; that is, it occupies the literal and therefore the symbolic center of the hallowed location in which the poet/scholar writes and studies, here also demeaned by the word "workshop" as though the tool has left its mark on the very identity of the space in addition to inconveniently filling it with its bright presence. The vision of the vise-haunted "workshop" stands in stark opposition to the poet/scholar's heaven that Berryman imagines in the earlier, uncompleted *Scholars at the Orchid Pavilion*, a work that was planned to form the *Paradise to the Hell of The Black Book* and the *Purgatory of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*. The heaven imagined in the published portions of *Scholars* is a calming, open space, permeable to the

forces of nature—its effect on the artist’s psyche might well be envisioned as the opposite of the restrictive vise of Dream Song 52:

The Bamboo’s bending power formed our theme
next dawn, under a splendid wind. The water
flapped to our tender gaze.
Girls came & crouched with tea. Great Wu pinched one,
forgetting his later nature. How the wind howled,
tranquil was our pavilion,
watching & reflecting, fingering bamboo.

(CP, 246)

The gesture of the vise—restrictive, fearful, neurotic—is diametrically opposed to the gesture of the open pavilion which invites sexual freedom and mental contemplation, or at least, for the speaker in the poem, the contemplation of sexual freedom, a prerequisite to so much of Berryman’s corpus. This is confirmed a little later, in line 10: “He can’t work well with it here, or think.” The poem then expresses an explicit fear for the loss of every vital faculty: “Will Henry again ever be on the lookout for women & milk, / honour & love again, / have a buck or three?” Each source of Eros, subsistence, and comfort is undermined and mourned, as though the poet who cannot work cannot even exist. The title of the poem, “Silent Song,” stings a little once the reader catches this theme: the poem is an ode to vital impoverishment as tragic as anything in Stevens (though perhaps less subtle).

In the final stanza, this silence is made manifest by the presence in the poem of a loud noise that remains unsounded:

He felt like shrieking but he shuddered as
(spring mist, warm, rain) an handful with quietness
vanisht & the thing took hold.

Henry’s shriek, mutated into a silent “shudder,” embraces within the muffling clasp of parentheses the traditional beauty of nature, of air and water, that brushed against and ran among the personae of Scholars at the Orchid Pavilion but here is inaccessible and inexpressible, a

parenthetical and decontextualized image bound to an unuttered utterance. Yet the distinction between diegesis and text is crucial here: the poem itself, “Silent Song,” despite all its profound negation, does contain the very glimpse of heaven the absence of which it works so diligently to establish. This tiny moment of “spring mist, warm, rain,” sounding like a fragment from Basho or Li Bai, transports us momentarily to the transcendent realm of Scholars, the poets’ heaven that in “Silent Song” is inaccessible to Henry but intimated through that very inaccessibility.

There is, therefore, a redemptive undertone to the parenthesis, an almost Eucharistic presence of a thing otherwise absent. The second stanza primes us for such a reading: there is “A bilocation, yellow like catastrophe,” and we are told, unsettlingly, “The name of this was freedom.” This “bilocation” may be the vise itself, elaborately referring to the two sides of the machine joined in one apparatus; or we could read the term as ironically describing the irreconcilable and untenable presence of both Henry and the vise in the same space, which would imply some identity between the two as well as the disunity of the space itself once repurposed away from art. Neither seems congruent with “freedom.” But haunting both these readings is the theological meaning of the term, which in Catholic doctrine and its cultural offshoots is used specifically to describe the presence of a finite being in two places at once. The concept is philosophically crucial to the idea that the body of Christ can exist simultaneously in heaven and in the consecrated host, drawing a distinction between circumscriptive presence (in which the external surfaces of a thing are in contact with other external surfaces) and definitive presence (in which an incorporeal being, spirit or soul, occupies a space) and arguing that a single entity may thereby be differently present in two distinct places.¹⁰² I mention this obscurity for two reasons: first, because scholarly Berryman the sometimes-Catholic no doubt had this meaning at

¹⁰²“See F. P. Siegfried, “Bilocation,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, eds. Charles G. Herbermann et al., vol. 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), 568.

least partly in mind; and second, because the possibility of a body in one place and a spirit in another is the only hope for Henry in the hospital songs that begin Book III. The difference between these scenes and the phantasmagoric hell of Book I lies largely in the possibility of transcendence away from the immediate tortures of hospital or vise and towards a realm more amenable to the poet/scholar, the realm of the Orchid Pavilion and the Eucharistic parenthesis of “(spring mist, warm, rain)” —in a word, heaven, though an inaccessible and therefore a failed one, the first of many that hold Book III together.

The world of the hospital itself sprawls across Dream Songs 53 & 54, which might comfortably be read as a single unit. The beginning of 53, “He lay in the middle of the world, and twitch,” evokes a sense of sinister enclosure similar to the oppressive presence of the vise in the previous poem, though there is a note of ambiguity in “world,” which may betray a slight awareness of the wider social and natural realms that exist outside of sickness and hospitalization. Yet there is a sense of hell here: “More Sparine for Pelides, / human (half) & down here as he is” imagines Henry as Achilles doped up on powerful antipsychotics. Dante in *Inferno* condemned him to the second circle of hell for lust; here he is condemned to hospitalization for his psychosis or mania (a conceivable rendering of the wrath/rage (*μηνις*) of the *Iliad*’s first line), a mental state that in Berryman’s poetry cannot wholly be separated from acute sexual urges (cf. Dream Song 4), and thus is not far removed from lust after all. “Down here” further implies a location in some sort of hell, though the gravity of the situation is lessened somewhat by the wry “with probably insulting mail to open.”

The meaning of the poem, however, hinges on line 6, “and his unforgivable memory.” If this is the worst of all Henry’s dark company—and we might parse “his memory” with either the subjective or the objective genitive, the things in Henry’s mind or the impressions he has left on

the world—then, like Milton’s Satan, he himself is Hell. Whether this is motivated by a hint of self-loathing or the guilt of hospitalization, it provides a possible answer why heaven after heaven remains inaccessible to Henry: he is simply not suited for them, nor they for him. He is too caught up in the world and in his own place in it. In fact, the entanglement of Henry’s own psyche with the social world of literature, history, and culture is so firm that the poem relies on examples from those realms in order to evoke a personal, subjective state through examples. The quotations from Eliot about the distracting nature of films, and from Bellow about the distracting nature of ‘papers, are isomorphic with Henry’s own fixation, here, on the distracting nature of the world, of opinions and quotations and the lives of great men.

It is a seamless transition from this neurotic meditation on external influence to the retreat into solitude that characterizes Dream Song 54, which begins:

‘NO VISITORS’ I thumb the roller to
and leans against the door.
Comfortable in my horseblanket
I prop on the costly bed & dream of my wife,
my first wife,
and my second wife & my son.

(DS54)

The self-imposed isolation of the “No Visitors” sign seems to contradict the deliberate meditation on family members and romantic partners, but in fact the two are quite consistent. Compared with the involuntary influx of social impressions from the cultural world in 53, the meditation and conflation of first and second wife here reduces the character of external agents to a syntagmatic cipher, a relational slot within the speaker’s self. This depressive solipsism is the opposite of the manic sensibility in 53, and it is supported physically by the “guardrails” that they put up around Henry’s hospital bed “as if it were a crib,” as well as figuratively by the equally solipsistic simile that ends the second stanza:

I have been operating from nothing,
like a dog after its tail
more slowly, losing altitude.

The image is one of physical as well as psychological isolation, a being caught in a recursive downward spiral, moving along a vector toward nothing but itself. The implied spiritual motion directly opposes the linear thrust of a quest or pilgrimage narrative like Dante's; although a refutation of the troubling circumstances in 53, this centrifugal meditation does not bring Henry closer to any sort of paradise, even though the poem itself—the text—approaches a moment of salvific respite through its own linear progression:

Nitid. They are shooting me full of sings.
I give no rules. Write as short as you can,
in order, of what matters.
I think of my beloved poet
Issa & his father who
sat down on the grass and took leave of each other.

Multiple layers of significance are bundled tightly into this final stanza. First, perhaps most obviously, is the natural beauty and calm verbal gesturing of the final three lines, which transport us once again to the world of the Orchid Pavilion, the poet/scholars' paradise. There is a similar glimpse of the nature world in the perhaps-drug-induced visionary adjective "nitid," a term generally reserved for descriptions of bright plant life. The reader does not know precisely what the word refers to—perhaps Henry, or more likely Henry's vision of his surroundings, transformed into a sort of natural luminescence. It is fitting that these glimpses should occur at the end of this pair of hospital poems; heaven looms just beyond them, visible but unattainable. Second, it is a heaven intimately tied with writing, both by the mention of Edo period poet Issa (whom the speaker calls "my beloved," as though he were more kin than first wife or second wife or son) and by the transitional dictum "Write as short as you can, / in order, of what

matters.” Poetry is in part the key to this heaven—but we must not forget that the very enterprise of poetry was thwarted by the vise in DS52, “Silent Song.”

Third, and finally, the stanza has autobiographical significance for Berryman the poet (and for Henry the speaker, whose experiences, of course, align closely with Berryman’s). Berryman’s father’s suicide or shooting, arguably the central trauma of the poet’s self-constructed biography, deprived Berryman of any meaningful or satisfying closure in his relationship with his father. Kobayashi Issa, in the early 19th-century confessional prose text *Chichi no Shūen Nikki* (or *Diary of My Father’s Last Days*), describes the month or so leading up to his father’s death by illness, a period during which the poet has the leisure to reflect upon their relationship contemplatively and to come to terms with his pending loss. Whether the scene evoked in DS54 is a scene preceding a death or merely a scene of temporary, worldly leave-taking, its significance to Berryman lies in its very antithesis to his experience of his own father’s death—sudden, uncertain, with no chance for closure or farewells.¹⁰³ If this is the central sorrow of the poet’s life, than this alternate possibility, intimated through reference to Issa, is paradise—the relief of all sorrows. But it is only intimation, perhaps even a drug-induced dream (“They are shooting me full of sings”), not a resting place or answer for the tortured speaker.

What follows is, appropriately, an explicit look into—or at least toward—heaven itself, in Dream Song 55:

Peter’s not friendly. He gives me sideways looks.
The architecture is far from reassuring.
I feel uneasy.

(DS55)

¹⁰³ Haffenden reads this scene differently, equating Issa’s mother, who died when he was a boy, with Berryman’s father. (John Berryman: A Critical Commentary, 99). Such a transformation, while intriguing, obfuscates the direct relevance of the Issa story to Berryman’s constructed psyche.

The comedic retelling of a scene at the gates of heaven that resembles nothing so much as a job interview gone wrong not only occupies a crucial structural position in Book III, as the text emerges from its own sickbed, but it is also perhaps the most explicit reference in 77 Dream Songs to a specific part of the Christian, and therefore the Dantean, afterlife. Of course, the scene is a deep perversion of Dante's heavenly spheres and their sainted residents: St. Peter sloshes a martini and the two make meaningless small talk about "God's health, the vague hell of the Congo, / John's energy, / anti-matter matter." Confusions of politics, gossip, and pseudo-science replace the gravity of theology that gives Dante's journey its reason for being. But this undermining of the image and mechanics of heaven itself is necessary in order for Berryman to propel his epic forward toward its own unique and strangely comforting conclusion. The shift that occurs between the first three poems of Book III and this explicit scene at the gates of paradise is a textual shift from intimation to subversion. In the hospital songs, the text nudged forward toward a glimpse of heaven, inaccessible but approached in reverence. Here, we stand at the very gates. This is no sacred asymptote—it is a bathetic and disappointing arrival at a place of no real interest or significance, still inaccessible, yes, but now with no real promise even of unlikely rewards. And perhaps worst of all, we get the impression that this Peter is not a very good one: his final words in the poem (and in the speaker's experience) are "We betrayed me," a strange implosion of the biblical story of Peter denying Jesus three times. That is, Jesus, Peter, and Henry—savior, saint, and speaker—all ooze into a single grammatical argument, "We," and the reader is left with the tragic impression that this heaven is not only one to which Henry is denied entrance, but a wholly inefficacious one with no savior, thus no salvation, and thus no meaning.

As Book III proceeds, other possible heavens are posited, examined, rejected, and left behind, one by one. We do not have time here to parse them all, but we may hint toward readings of several. In DS 56 (“Hell is empty”), we glimpse a heaven of sheer negation: according to Origen’s (3rd c.) doctrine of apocatastasis, every soul will be saved—yet this salvation does not afford Henry a place in a full heaven, but merely a glimpse of an empty hell. Damnation is offhandedly but unconvincingly dismissed in DS57 (“To Hell then will it maul me? ... I think not”); a peaceful land is shattered by the reminder of a distant war (DS61); and possibly the most appealing of all heavens, the innocence of nocturnal critters, is juxtaposed with the realm of tepid human suffering (DS63):

Bats have no bankers and they do not drink
and cannot be arrested and pay no tax
and, in general, bats have it made.
Henry for joining the human race is bats,
known to be so, by few them who think,
out of the cave.

(DS63)

Once again, as in DS27 that opened Book II with its images of brownies and “little people” among the green delta, Berryman subjects Henry to a vision of a beatific alternative to humanity that remains tantalizingly inaccessible to the human. But in DS27, the function of the disconnect was to establish a stative, purgatorial condition; here, the paradise of bats is rejected outright as a possibility from which Henry must move on entirely.

And move on he does, arriving finally in Dream Song 77 at the absolute necessity to abandon ideas of heaven and depart into some vague and possibly salvific future that may not involve any of the quotidian burdens of human existence:

Seedy Henry rose up shy in de world
& shaved & swung his barbells, duded Henry up
and p.a.’s poor thousands of persons on topics of grand

moment to Henry, ah to those less & none.
Wif a book of his in either hand
He is stript down to move on.

—Come away, Mr Bones.

—Henry is tired of the winter,
& haircuts, & a squeamish comfy ruin-prone proud national
mind, & Spring (in the city so called).
Hé would be prepared to líve in a world of Fáll
for ever, impenitent Henry.
But the snows and summers grieve & dream

Thése fierce & airy occupations, and love,
raved away so many of Henry's years
it is a wonder that, with in each hand
one of his own mad books and all,
ancient fires for eyes, his head full
& his heart full, he's making ready to move on.

(DS77)

Winter, haircuts, workouts, politics—these are exactly the trappings of the human world that so deeply plagued Henry throughout 77 Dream Songs, here reduced from fierce adversaries to their own small selves. The whole tone of the poem is one of hushed surrender and tentative contentment, as though Henry has finally, perhaps, found the safety, security, and salvation that the epic is required to deliver to its people. But it is emphatically not the religious salvation of Dante's Paradiso. Henry's own stated contentment with living forever in a "world of Fall"—that is, to be always a sinner in a fallen world—puts to rest his struggle with Dante, choosing at last to make his journey his own. We might read "ancient fires for eyes" as one final transformation of a Dantean image, the vision of the trinity as a triad of colored lights revealed to Dante only at the end of his journey.¹⁰⁴ Instead of three the lights are two; instead of external they are internal, personal, to be seen with rather than to be seen; and their "ancient fire" is of a

¹⁰⁴ Par. XXXIII.115-120.

different imagic hue, more rustic, more pagan perhaps, than the purity of Dante's *Light Eternal*. Becoming a vision instead of having one, ready to move on instead of locked in eternal almost-arriving, Henry's final appearance in *77 Dream Songs* both finally cements and thoroughly undermines Dante's influence on Berryman's epic.

Conclusion

Finally, I should emphasize once again, for the sake of critical honesty, that it would take a leap of faith to defend the corollary that Berryman's modeling of *77 Dream Songs* on the *Commedia* was entirely deliberate. If I may speculate, perhaps irresponsibly, I believe the mode in which Berryman composed the three books was not necessarily one in which the author began with a clear conception that each would correspond with one third of Dante's afterlife. Rather, I believe that Berryman, having spent the preceding decades thoroughly absorbing every aspect of Dante's masterpiece, could not help but see Henry's journey as similar to Dante's. Images and motifs from the *Commedia* suggested themselves freely to the poet as he guided his creation toward a sort of conclusion at the end of Book III; it is unsurprising that the beginning should read as somewhat hellish, the end as a sort of paradise, and the middle as a halfway house between the two. Additionally, thoughts about all three places must have fomented in Berryman's mind for some time, at least since the conception of the trilogy that would have comprised *The Black Book*, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, and *Scholars at the Orchid Pavilion*. That two of the three were abandoned is proof enough that Berryman found his straight interpretations of the themes to be artistically unsatisfying. The absurd, grotesque, and wildly inventive landscape of the *Dream Songs* seems like the perfect antidote for whatever drought caused the initial project to wither, and it is there that Berryman's Dante found a home in which

to flourish. And so the 13th century invaded the 20th, and Berryman, wittingly or not, wrestled epic out of the mytho-saturation in which Pound had left it, just as Dante had transformed Virgil's poetics into a poetics of the individual soul.

Chapter 3: Robert Lowell, Mythos, and the Inexorable IS

The figure of Robert Lowell looms uniquely large over the latter half of the twentieth century. Though his critical reputation has risen and fallen in subsequent decades, no other poet is remembered as having been assumed to represent the cultural and national moment in quite the same way that Lowell is.¹⁰⁵ Yet the literary establishment that once considered Lowell with messianic reverence now remembers him as one whom it perhaps revered too much. Despite mountains of criticism on Lowell's work (and its specious corollary, his life), the twenty-first century is still not quite sure what to do with him. In fact it is almost a cliché to begin a piece on Lowell—as I have done here—with a nod down toward the slippery ground his reputation rests upon.¹⁰⁶ The problem that Steven Gould Axelrod identified in the mid-1980s is still relevant today:

Lowell's readers must now try to read his work in the shadows of these biographies. But how do we avoid reading the life that biography has invented in place of the poems we have been given? Why are we tempted to let these readerly fictions of a life master and enslave the writerly poems that justify them? The fascination with biography may simply be a way to domesticate Lowell's wild

¹⁰⁵ Tillinghast puts it well: "If any midcentury American poet seemed in the estimation of his contemporaries certain to be read and admired by posterity, surely that poet was Robert Lowell . . . Lowell straddled the poetry scene of his day like a colossus—perhaps, in retrospect, to use one of his own favorite adjectives, a 'top-heavy' colossus, ripe for a fall." *Robert Lowell's Life and Work: Damaged Grandeur* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 26.

¹⁰⁶ E.g. Joyce Carol Oates in 2004: ". . . Robert Lowell, like his poet-friend John Berryman, is most revered by middle-aged and older readers of poetry, and relatively ignored by younger poets . . . Reputations wax and wane, and what may be lost in one decade may be excitedly found in the next." ("On Robert Lowell," *Salmagundi*, no. 141/142 (2004): 117.)

words, a way to control the anarchic energy of texts that perversely attract and evade us, threaten us and give us pleasure.¹⁰⁷

The exact source of Lowell's gargantuan reputation is difficult to locate. He did not shape a generation's critical judgment as Jarrell did, nor was he at the center of a discrete cultural movement like Ginsberg, nor did he, like Bishop, leave behind a well-wrought oeuvre with few blemishes and little chaff. Yet something about Lowell's characteristic blend of the personal and the public spheres—the minutiae of married life, interior faith, and individual conviction, balanced against the maxima of sexuality, metaphysics, and politics—struck a chord in the imagination of postwar America and allowed Lowell to occupy an esteemed cultural position that did not even exist in previous generations.¹⁰⁸ As Jeremiah or apocalyptic prophet, Lowell presented a countercultural thrust against conservative ideology and postwar jingoism; as formalist, and unabashed erudite, he was a champion of tradition and the establishment that many of his contemporaries sought to overturn or break away from.

Remember that it was Lowell himself who first applied the terms “raw” and “cooked” to two purportedly antithetical trends in American poetry.¹⁰⁹ This sort of observation is most easily

¹⁰⁷ Steven Gould Axelrod, “Lowell's Living Name: An Introduction,” in Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry, ed. Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1.

¹⁰⁸ Of course the position of poet laureate de facto if not de jure, existed before Lowell occupied it. James Sullivan gives a sound account of the passing of the mantle from Eliot to Lowell in “Investing the Cultural Capital of Robert Lowell,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 38, no. 2 (1992), 196-197. However, Eliot's inert conservatism never had the sort of mass political appeal that made Lowell a half-unwilling hero of the American Left.

¹⁰⁹ Lowell's use of the terms dates to his acceptance speech for the National Book Award in 1960. Because it is often quoted out of context, I will reproduce the relevant passage here. Note the general tone of late-historical anxiety, not of influence but of influence's sudden withdrawal—poetry as a province abandoned by the empire: “I am afraid that writing verse

made by one standing in the eye of the storm. Rightly or wrongly, our culture remembers Lowell as the leftist firebrand who pointed and publicly refused President Johnson's invitation to the 1965 White House Festival of the Arts, and who participated in the 1967 march on the Pentagon, made famous by Norman Mailer's account in *Armies of the Night*—but also as the tortured, guilt-ridden, and occasionally desperate confessor of madness, grief, infidelity, perversion, and doubt. These apparent contradictions suggest to us a cultural figure large enough to contain them both. Lowell's legacy is a profound amalgamation of opposites.

Ultimately, the agent of this amalgamation—the vectors of the unifying force that Lowell exerts on his matter—is more significant to his poetics than the matter itself. Or consider it this way: Lowell himself is a force, and when considered as such comes across as far less protean than his shifting style suggests. Consider the change from the devout Catholic writer of *Lord Weary's Castle* to the disillusioned non-believer of *Life Studies*, or the shift from the pyrotechnic formalism of Lowell's early verse to the freer cadences of his later work. In spite of these differences, poems of each period undeniably belong to the same poetic world. Lowell's

rather atrophies one's faculties for communication. Our modern American poetry has a snarl on its hands. Something earth-shaking was started about fifty years ago by the generation of Eliot, Frost and William Carlos Williams. We have had a run of poetry as inspired, and perhaps as important, and sadly brief as that of Baudelaire and his successors, or that of the dying Roman Republic and early Empire. Two poetries are now competing, a cooked and a raw. The cooked, marvelously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar. The raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience are dished up for midnight listeners. There is a poetry that can only be studied, and a poetry that can only be declaimed, a poetry of pedantry, and a poetry of scandal. I exaggerate, of course. Randall Jarrell has said that the modern world has destroyed the intelligent poet's audience and given him students. James Baldwin has said that many of the beat writers are as inarticulate as our statesmen." (Robert Lowell, "National Book Award Acceptance Speeches," National Book Foundation, accessed August 21, 2015, http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_rlowell.html#.VddTZflViko.)

amalgamating force runs both horizontally, holding together contradictory spheres of experience in his poems, and vertically, uniting the stages of his career through its unremitting presence.

Yet something is lost through this process as well. Lowell's tendency to amalgamate disparate or contradictory elements is not the sort of gentle, constructive syncretism that one sees, say, in Whitman's juxtapositions of industry and nature, nor does Lowell's combination of the personal and the public create a sort of everyman over-soul like Whitman's "I." Rather, Lowell gives us a personal consciousness that has the power to shut out the public sphere, and a public sphere—be it political, religious, historical, or metaphysical—that more often than not threatens to extinguish the personal. The two are poised in a state of perennial strife, and though both are profoundly present, the idea of annihilation haunts the sum.

It is this delicate but brutal balancing that makes Lowell an essential player in the story of the afterlife of epic in the twentieth century. This chapter explores Lowell's particular relation to the idea of epic in three ways. First: Lowell's work, from *Lord Weary's Castle* onward, treats ethos, or character, as an embattled force struggling to emerge from the landslide of mythos under which it was buried by Pound's epic turn (cf. Ch. 1). Second: in *Life Studies* Lowell crafts an elegant and powerful manifestation of the complicated play between mythos and ethos in which the implicit separation between individual and world, present and past, patient and agent, begins to fall apart. Third: the later Lowell of Notebook 1967–68 engages with history and mythos in a manner closely in keeping with the traditional mechanics of the Homeric epics as described by Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, creating a poet-figure-speaker who is at once the shaper of the world of mythos he inhabits as well as its subjugated victim.

Embattled Ethos in *Lord Weary's Castle*

Lowell himself included a prefatory note to his second (and first successful) volume of poetry, *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), explaining that “My title comes from an old ballad:

‘It’s Lambkin was a mason good
As ever built wi’ stane:
He built Lord Wearie’s castle
But payment gat he nane . . .’¹¹⁰

Of course, the ballad does not end there. The mason begs for his fee; the miserly laird refuses payment and sails away to foreign parts (sparing no expense on his “bonny ship,” it might be noted). Conspiring with the nurse, herself a “fause limmer,” Lamkin stabs the infant son to lure the wife/mother to a bloody end on the tip of his knife. Here the devious Lamkin’s will outpaces the nurse’s simple lust for revenge: he collects the lady’s blood in a clean basin to present to Lord Wearie upon his return, in spite of the nurse’s egalitarian protest:

‘There need nae bason, Lamkin,
lat it run through the floor ;
What better is the heart’s blood
o the rich than o the poor ? ’

Of course, this is one of the points Lamkin is trying to make. We can only hope that the irony is not lost on Lord Wearie when Lamkin presents him the bowl of his lady’s blood, “clear as the lamer,” and the baby’s blood on the hall floor, “the clearest ava.” Blood is blood, and surely neither victim’s shines with the purity that Lamkin ascribes to it—his assertions are pure mockery. Finally, Lamkin and the nurse are both put to death, swiftly and without pathos:

¹¹⁰ I have not found Lowell’s exact source for this text. The most obvious candidate is Francis Child’s *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, where a text very similar to this is collected as 93A. Child’s text, however, lacks the Scots form “gat” in line 4. I like to think that the variations are Lowell’s, an effort, conscious or not, to lend a more exotic edge to his epigraph, dragging it further into the ethno-historical past of New England’s cultural ancestry.

O sweetly sang the black-bird
that sat upon the tree ;
But sairer grat Lamkin,
when he was condemned to die.

And bonny sang the mavis,
out o the thorny brake ;
But sairer grat the nourice,
when she was tied to the stake.

The subtlety of these last two stanzas is astounding. Other variations of the ballad aim to shock the audience with grisly detail (in Child 93B, the mason is hanged above his own gate; in D, he is boiled in lead). Here in the A version—presumably Lowell’s source—the deaths of the two villains fade into meaninglessness against a cosmic background of undying birdsong. The joy of “sweetly” and “bonny” is tempered by the melancholy comparative “sairer” (that is, more sorely, more sorrowfully). The juxtaposition does not lend meaning to the deaths, but serves as a chilling reminder that birdsong, murder, swindling, and execution all inhabit the same universe. The leveling effect of the ending echoes Lamkin’s own ironic comments on the purity of his victim’s blood, and reminds us that this is all part of a zero-sum game: the unjust, swindling Lord Wearie is as much a criminal as Lamkin, and in a post-feudal economy, the withholding of payment is but a subtler form of murder. “Payment got he nane” even in death: Lamkin is quietly swallowed by the invisible power network against which he struggled in vain, and though Lord Wearie may suffer at the loss of his wife and baby, the essence of his power and position remain unaltered.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Though the matter is ultimately ambiguous, the ballad hints that the slaughtered young son was probably not Lord Wearie’s heir, as we learn earlier that “the bairns o this house” are “at the school reading” when the murders occur; if any of these is a male, then the baby’s murder had no more structural significance than the half-expected threat of natural infant mortality.

Several critics have commented on the possible significance of the ballad to Lowell's eponymous volume. A 1947 review by Austin Warren attempts to explain the title as social allegory: "His title, from the ballad *Lamkin*, implies such intent: disaster is befalling the house, and the household, of aristocratic (Calvinist, Capitalist) New England, which has failed to pay its moral bills to the "lower orders," its instruments."¹¹² Warren's interpretation, like others, focuses too heavily on the tragedy befalling Lord Wearie, who, after all, is barely a character in the ballad—he is a cipher, an empty manifestation of social power. The figure of ethos in the ballad—the locus of will, action, character, and agency—is *Lamkin* himself. His struggle is against an oppressive and intractable backdrop of power and entrenched social custom, the *mythos* to his *ethos*.

The phrase "Lord Weary's Castle," then, evokes not a house in disarray, but an incident—a catalyst. The castle matters insofar as it incites the struggle of ethos against *mythos* that occupies the rest of the ballad, as well as the physical and structural field in which the struggle plays out. If we are to imagine that Lowell's 1946 volume is Lord Weary's castle, then we are being asked to view the book itself as a site of epic play and struggle, and to view the book's own mason, Lowell, as the principal agent of that struggle, a crafting hand who is present even when the poems are sheer fictions.

Nowhere is the supremacy of *mythos* established so strongly than in the volume's first poem, "The Exile's Return." Though the poem borrows elements of its setting and its imagery from Thomas Mann's 1903 novella *Tonio Kröger*, its near-apocalyptic postwar ambiance is entirely Lowell's own invention. To those familiar with Lowell's source, the poem reads as a violent reimagining of a very late *Strum und Drang* setting. In Mann's original, the dismal

¹¹² "A Double Discipline: Lord Weary's Castle by Robert Lowell," *Poetry* 70, no. 5 (August 1947): 262.

weather that opens Lowell's poem—"There mounts in squalls a sort of rusty mire / Not ice, not snow, to leaguer the Hôtel / De Ville"—reflects the tortured adolescent soul of natural born poet Tonio Kröger, who at the age of 14 is suffering from excessive and unrequited love for his close friend Hans. The two go for a walk on a winter's day just as dismal as Lowell's, and Kröger fails to interest his level-headed friend in the ecstasies of reading Schiller, the first of many revelations about the irreconcilability of art and life. Other of the poem's images, such as the "gray, sorry and ancestral house" and the "walnut tree"—as well as, presumably, the poem's title—come from a later episode where the maturing artist, having made a name for himself in the big city, returns to his childhood home to find it all horribly changed. The transformations, though, are subtler than the utter devastation in Lowell's text: in Mann, the walnut tree still stands, and the ancestral home has been transformed rather benignly into a public library; the only devastation is Kröger's own feeling of not belonging. The damage is all interior; Mann's text roils with an ethos that relates to the world only through the world's subjective, psychological effects.

Lowell's poem takes this structure and neatly inverts it. Character or ethos, the overwhelming presence in Mann's story, does not even appear until the middle of Lowell's poem, and then only as reference or address, first in "your gray, sorry, and ancestral house" and then in the declarative:

. . . You will not see
Strutting children or meet
The peg-leg and reproachful chancellor
With a forget-me-not in his button-hole . . .

The figures here are absent ones, and the "you" is defined only by negation—it is the watchful eye, the entity that knows itself only as that which is separate from the scene it witnesses. The primary presence in the poem, unlike in Mann's story, is not ethos but rather mythos: the

collective, non-individual, socio-historical and quasi-reverential backdrop to the action. In Tonio Kröger, mythos exists as a generalized sense of nostalgia for home and roots. Kröger is not Odysseus striving toward Ithaca, but Odysseus sitting around wondering why Ithaca has changed so much. Mann's mythos is deeply subordinate to ethos. In "The Exile's Return," however, the backdrop has moved to the foreground. Details of scene and context exist independently of the poem's weakly implied subjectivity:

. . . braced pig-iron dragons grip
The blizzard to their rigor mortis. A bell
Grumbles when the reverberations strip
The thatching from its spire,
The search-guns click and spit and split up timber
And nick the slate roofs on the Holstenwall
Where torn-up tilestones crown the victor. . . .

(LWC, 9)

We have already seen how Pound's reimagining of epic in the early 20th century allowed mythos to supplant ethos, becoming the principal actor on its own stage. The dynamic we encounter in the Lowell of *Lord Weary's Castle*, however, is subtly different. Mythos here has swelled to outrageous proportions, but in doing so it has come into conflict with itself. The deep historical stratum of Old World order and stateliness is being torn to pieces, quite literally, by the violent upheavals of the century's brutal World Wars (one assumes that Lowell, writing in 1946, was thinking primarily of the Second, but the lack of historically specific details only serves to universalize then-recent history—to push it, that is, away from the plane of mere plot and into the plane of mythos). Mythos—or, as we might otherwise conceive of it, the cumulative and now nearly glacial weight of history—has grown into an oppressive and inexorable juggernaut. Ethos, in the usual sense of personal, subjective character, still exists, but it faces a daunting adversary that, like the gods of the Homeric epic, is at war even with itself.

This is the preliminary condition of much of Lowell's oeuvre, and it is essential to an understanding of Lowell's relationship to the tradition of epic. Mythos, in whatever form it takes—history, family, poetic tradition—exists as that which is always about to crush ethos, but with all the dispassion of a tidal wave. Hope, insofar as it exists at all in this gloomy milieu, exists as part of the general background, as an aspect of mythos over which ethos has no control and to which it has no access. Consider the closing lines of "The Exile's Return":

. . . but already lily-stands
Burgeon the risen Rhineland, and a rough
Cathedral lifts its eye. Pleasant enough,
Voi ch'entrate, and your life is in your hands.

The juxtaposition of nature imagery with doom and destruction recalls the ending of the ballad "Lamkin," when the birds sing as Lamkin hangs. In both cases, the continuous and vibrant cycle of life has no immediate impact on the embattled protagonist. Lowell, characteristically, pushes matters a step further with the allusion to Dante's *Inferno* in the final line: the poem's unspecified second-person character is shown a glimpse of hope and then told quite explicitly to abandon it, just as the gates of Dante's Hell announce "Abandon all hope, you who enter." In fact, we can easily imagine the whole of the poem's second-person perspective—a rarity in Lowell and in twentieth-century poetry generally—having been built around this single unspoken exhortation. The poem itself becomes a warning sign hanging at the entrance not only of *Lord Weary's Castle* but of Lowell's entire mature oeuvre.¹¹³

¹¹³ There is a touch of the heroic here as well, of course, as Katharine Wallingford points out: "For a reader who knows that Lowell has thirty years after the date of this poem in which to write poetry, and that the subject of his poetry was so often to be the person of Robert Lowell, himself, the last words offer some hope. 'Your life is in your hands,' he tells the exile . . . who is, among others, himself. *Robert Lowell's Language of the Self* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 123.

The “you” of the poem, then, can perhaps best be read as a sort of “I”—an “I” divided by a lyrical consciousness that is capable of directly grasping the greater milieu which determines and contains its subjectivity. This is one of Lowell’s great achievements, and one of the reasons why the easy label “confessional” never quite fit even the poems of the Life Studies era. As personal and autobiographical as Lowell’s verse sometimes is, the speaking voice—the primary poetic consciousness, which is not always coterminous with character or ethos within the poem—more often than not betrays an awareness of the weighty and threatening mythos that haunts the scene.

In “The Exile’s Return,” the “you” is clearly a sort of poet-figure, not only through analogy with Mann’s Tonio Kröger, but also through its relationship to scene and action as a mostly passive observer, or a potential agent paralyzed by adversity. In the absence of additional characterizing information, the “you” is implicated in the act of poesis that creates the poem’s world. This impression is especially given by the apophatic assertions of absence, “You will not see . . .” and following. The “strutting children” and the “peg-leg and reproachful chancellor” exist in the world of the poem as powerfully as they do not exist in the immediate scene that the poem sketches; they arise from the implied consciousness of “you” as much as from the words of the speaking voice. Their conjuring is essential, central even—the world of the poem would be a decidedly different one without them, its emotional affect lacking the twinge of futile nostalgia that makes the poem what it is.

Lowell frequently employs this sort of world-building, poet-surrogate ethos, especially in the quasi-autobiographical poems of Life Studies and the understated pseudo-diary of Notebook 1967—1968, both of which we will examine in detail shortly. But it is hardly the only sort of ethos Lowell employs—not every speaking voice is a poet-figure, nor every “you” or “he.”

One peculiar result of this dynamic is the recurring treatment of the figure of Christ in then-still-Catholic Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle*. The book's religion is already a peculiar and unorthodox amalgamation of antithetical traditions, as the Catholic pageantry of Lowell's chosen present:

clashes with the Puritan rhetoric of his inherited past:¹¹⁴

alongside an admixture of Classical stoicism:

¹¹⁴ Note here an actual and quite literal instance of ethos struggling against mythos, the would-be rebel wholly unable to escape the ubiquitous pull of the thing he is rebelling against. Think also of "Rebellion," in which Lowell, having struck down his father in anger, finds himself swiftly punished by nothing more or less than the idea of apocalypse.

The greatest peculiarity of religion in *Lord Weary's Castle*, however, is Lowell's construction of a Christ who belongs more to the world of character than to the larger milieu of power that character struggles against. It is not so unusual for the savior-figure of the Christian religions to inhabit the same conceptual plane as humanity: the idea of “the word made flesh” is, after all, a descent or emergence from mythos into ethos, from universality to particularity. However, Lowell troubles this conventional dynamic through implications of a distant godhead—the dreadful “IS”—that belongs thoroughly to the realm of mythos, against and under which the ethos-Christ figure struggles just as Lowell's ordinary human characters are prone to struggle against inexorable networks of power and history.

One side of this equation, the portrayal of Christ as embattled ethos, is neatly present in “The Holy Innocents.”¹¹⁵ At first the subject of the poem is two oxen pulling a cart up an icy hill in winter, around Christmas time. The oxen do not become a symbol of Christ as the poem progresses; rather, in a gesture that Lowell would continue to use throughout his career, the two are yoked together in ambiguous apposition, implicated by proximity and mutual relevance without one being placed in a subordinate position to the other. Much of the correlation between the poem's central figures rests on the string of declarations and images at the end of the first stanza:

¹¹⁵ Dwight Eddins offers a more secular and political analysis of this poem, stating: “The victims of the state are seen in ‘The Holy Innocents’ as ‘speechless clods and infants’ ruled over by the murderous Herod.” (“Poet and State in the Verse of Robert Lowell,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 15, no. 2 (1973), in *Modern Critical Views: Robert Lowell*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 42.) This politicized reading certainly concurs with Lowell's apparent view of the State, but misses the larger point that some greater and more fundamental threat “out-Herods Herod.”

The oxen drool and start
In wonder at the fenders of a car,
And blunder hugely up St. Peter's hill.
These are the undefiled by woman—their
Sorrow is not the sorrow of this world:
King Herod shrieking vengeance at the curled
Up knees of Jesus choking in the air . . .

(LWC, 10)

The colon in line 8 is a clever turn, an almost painterly gesture to coax the reader's mind into the language of images. To put it another way: the strict logic of verbal grammar breaks down when we try to parse the exact relation between "King Herod shrieking vengeance" and the preceding sentence. The Herod lines could serve as an appositive explaining "the sorrow of this world." The oxen come out well in this scenario: their animal nature and their castration leave them two degrees removed from the frantic panic of the socialized human father figure defending his patriarchal virility against a newborn usurper. Rather nice to be spared from all that. Yet there is something too tidy about this reading. In stanza two,

. . . the oxen near
The worn foundations of their resting place,
The holy manger where their bed is corn
And holly torn for Christmas . . .

The oxen's place of rest recalls the image of the "curled up knees of Jesus," suggesting a link between the two that is more than mere cohabitation. True, oxen are traditionally present at the nativity scene in Christian mythology, but these particular oxen, imbued with character and depth, resist being read as mere scenery. Nor are they simply an enviable foil to the sorrows of the human world: their castration and animal obtuseness leaves them mere hulks, not blissfully ignorant but sadly anaesthetized:

The oxen drool and start
In wonder at the fenders of a car,

And blunder hugely up St. Peter's hill.

The language itself—the messy monosyllables of “drool and start,” the clunky trochees and semantic awkwardness of “blunder hugely”—assures the reader that the oxen's condition is not an enviable one. Though the beasts are physically strong, enslavement and castration—the work of the human world—have annulled their vitality, reducing them to a state of spiritual helplessness. The emergent image of the oxen in the first stanza conditions us to associate the image of Jesus “choking in the air” with infantility, not just infancy. Both Christ and the oxen are wrapped in the impotence of unknowing, and their identities are entwined, even confused. We can easily add Herod to this mix by glancing again at the ambiguous syntax of the end of stanza one and beginning of stanza two:

King Herod shrieking vengeance at the curled
Up knees of Jesus choking in the air,

A king of speechless clods and infants. . . .

If “king of speechless clods . . .” refers to Herod (rather than Jesus—both readings are feasible), then Herod is removed from his usually role of tyrannical brutality and corralled into a position of futility parallel to that of the oxen and Jesus. All three loci of ethos in the poem are therefore shown to be empty of agency—“innocent,” perhaps, through their sheer inefficacy.¹¹⁶

Yet there is a brutally efficacious presence in the poem: the world itself, which, albeit tacitly, the poem blames for the suffering of oxen, Jesus, and Herod alike:

¹¹⁶ Henry Hart treats this dynamic rather differently, seemingly reading all instances of ethos as implicitly egocentric or even megalomaniacal incarnations of the poet's self, speaking of the “self-aggrandizement in [Lowell's] identifications with Christ, Satan, Ahab, Moby Dick, America, and God.” However, I maintain that to allow these heroes and villains to appear as characters in verse that has most of its roots in the tradition of the subjective lyric is to nod toward the dynamics of epic ethos, not to subordinate aggrandize the lyric ego. Robert Lowell and the Sublime (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 118.

The world out-Herods Herod; and the year,
The nineteen-hundred forty-fifth of grace,
Lumbers with losses up the clinkered hill
Of our purgation . . .

Or perhaps “blame” is not the right word. There is always a sense in Lowell that the transcendent powers of mythos cannot be held accountable for the forces they exert; to do so would be to control them. Nevertheless, these lines ascribe a certain vicious agency to “world” and “year” alike. “Lumbers with losses” is a clumsy vestige of Lowell’s earlier verse, but it does capture the careless forward-hurling of a particularly brutal year in human history—we cannot hear Lowell the conscientious objector call the year of Hiroshima and Nagasaki a “year of grace” without detecting a hint of bitter irony alongside his genuine Catholic faith.

But the world that destroys—the world that Herods—is also the year that saves. “Purgation” is perhaps the most threatening word for salvation, but the idea remains the same. Mythos—time, the world, and the violently salvific nature of a godhead that, for Lowell, whether he means it to be or not, is unfathomably greater than the temporal person of Christ—is a thing that could be feared or praised, yet demands neither. Its transcendence of good and evil marks it as a strange reversal of Nietzsche’s over-man: it is the world in which the over-man dwells, yet it admits no denizen.

In *Lord Weary’s Castle*, of course, there is no over-man. Struggles are not acts of bravery, but aspects of existence under the looming cloud of mythos. The closest thing to victory is the deferral of defeat:

In Black Mud
Stephen the martyre was broken down to blood:
Our ransom is the rubble of his death.
 (“Colloquy in Black Rock,” LWC, 11)

Elsewhere in *Lord Weary's Castle*, Lowell implies a tenuous and complex connection between this boundless and inexorable power—"mythos" for our purposes—and the Judeo-Christian God. Twice in the volume—once in "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" and once in "Where the Rainbow Ends"—ethos finds itself threatened by a terrifying and ineffable entity, "IS." On the surface, the allusion plays with a number of textual sources, including the well-known phrase "I am that I am" (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה) from the Book of Exodus, and, perhaps more directly, a gloss on that verse from the Roman Catholic catechism, which Lowell, zealous as both a scholar and a convert, undoubtedly knew by heart: "The revelation of the ineffable name "I AM WHO AM" contains then the truth that God alone IS."¹¹⁷

The allusion, then, is transparent, but the meaning of IS within the context of *Lord Weary's Castle* is hazier. In "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," IS appears as a sort of seamen's myth, resembling Melville's (or Ahab's) Moby Dick more than any conventional religious figure. Remembering the sea's dead and lost sailors, Lowell writes:

. . . To Cape Cod
 Guns, cradled on the tide,
 Blast the eelgrass about a waterclock
 Of bilge and backwash, roil the salt and sand
 Lashing earth's scaffold, rock
 Our warships in the hand
 Of the great God, where time's contrition blues
 Whatever it was these Quaker sailors lost
 In the mad scramble of their lives. They died
 When time was open-eyed,
 Wooden and childish; only bones abide
 There, in the nowhere, where their boats were tossed
 Sky-high, where mariners had fabled news
 Of IS, the whited monster. What it cost

¹¹⁷ Additionally, Frank Bidart and David Gewanter cite Hopkins's "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire" as a possible source: "what Christ is, / . . . IS immortal diamond." (Collected Poems, p. 1009).

Them is their secret. . . .

(LWC, 14-18)

This passage begins in the lyric present but soon leaves it behind, extracting its later lines from the normal progression of history by placing it in a mythic past time “When time was open-eyed, / Wooden and childish.” This is the poem’s own self-consciously naïve variation on “Once upon a time,” an uncomplicated mythos built from a few simple archetypes (the hunt, the mystery of the deep, death). It is a place of far remove, of immeasurable distance and scope both in space and in time. To say that boats are “tossed sky-high” in a place that can be described as “the nowhere” is to conjure an immense nothingness, a fitting memorial to the bones of forgotten sailors. It is within this eerie milieu that we first encounter IS, which is as much a mystery to the sailors as it is to the reader. “Whited” conjures the white of bones, the white of wave crests, and the white of Ahab’s whale; the “whited monster” is a thing to be feared just as it is a thing to be hunted—an object of terror and desire, bound together in insolvable mystery. Certainly such an entity shares a thing or two with the godhead of Lowell’s Catholicism, but it is hard to see this awful power as synonymous with “the great God” in whose hand the ships rocked several lines earlier. That prior image is conventional, protective, while IS roils with frightful sublimity. Moreover, the conventional notion of “God” returns at the end of the section:

. . . In the sperm-whale’s slick
I see the Quakers drown and hear their cry:
“If God himself had not been on our side,
If God himself had not been on our side,
When the Atlantic rose against us, why,
Then it had swallowed us up quick.”

There are several layers of irony at play here, some of them quite bitter. The order of drowning and crying out is carefully reversed from its natural logic, casting a ghostly tone over the quoted speech. The Quaker sailors are here simply Quakers, stripped of their occupation at the moment

of its horrible culmination. The greatest irony of all, however, is the profession of faith and gratitude toward a protective deity even as the Quakers are drowning. Cautious wording protects the statement from absurdity: there is no claim that the sailors couldn't have drowned if God were on their side. The implication, then, is that death in the depths of the sea could come with or without the consent of a higher power.

Yet the "God" of the Quakers, allied no doubt with the "great God" in whose hands the ships rock, is a figure of safety, of protection. The power that governs blind destruction, the taker of lives in the sublime nowhere of the ocean, is the poem's "IS." Like the vicious "world" of "The Holy Innocents," or the oppressive weight of history in "The Exile's Return," "IS" is an all-encompassing and inexorable force. To claim that it represents one particular aspect of Lowell's deity would be to make a theological argument, not a poetic one; the text draws a sharp line between "IS" and the figure called "God." We might best conceive of this "IS" as mythos, both background and omnipresent threat to the play of characters within the poem. IS is not an object of religious devotion, but of a fervent and irresolvable motion towards. The "fabled news" the mariners receive is also the quarry of the poet—the truth of mythos, in its fearful totality, is the white whale of Lowell's oeuvre, equally inspiring of monomaniacal passion and equally unobtainable. Yet through its very name, IS is given the status of a deity—not Lowell's own Catholic God, perhaps, nor the angry Poseidon of the Odyssey, nor a generalized sort of existential dread, but a fell amalgamation of all these possibilities.

The central gesture of "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," then, is that IS—the mythos of the deep, of death, of "the nowhere"—always wins. One might struggle, but only to defer its victory. Part III of the poem begins with an ironic nod toward Homer:

All you recovered from Poseidon died
With you, my cousin, and the harrowed brine

Is fruitless on the blue beard of the god,
Stretching beyond us to the castles in Spain,
Nantucket's westward haven. . . .

What Odysseus “recovers” from Poseidon, his principal antagonist, is an immeasurable set of riches—life, land, home, family. The future Lowell imagines for the archetypal nautical wanderer is the brutal opposite of Tennyson’s future-hungry “Ulysses.” Death—the sea itself—steals the future, and, with it, the whole of the past as well. The ocean, “fruitless on the blue beard of the god,” offers no sort of rebirth or assumption of the dead into the cycle of life. The muddled geography of “castles in Spain” and “Nantucket’s westward haven” thrust the action a step deeper into the threatening vagueness of universality as particularities of place recede alongside those of character. The apposition implies either the confusion of two unrelated places, or else the futile placement of proverbial Spanish castles—that is, daydreamed possessions or achievements—on the shores of New England. The proverb makes perfect sense here—the safe haven of mainland New England, a sailor’s dream shelter, proves to be a pipe dream in the last thoughts of the drowned—but Lowell carefully chooses confusing language to ensure that the wide, mythic sublimity of the whole Atlantic hovers behind the fleeting image of safety. Far from the eventual victory of Odysseus’s struggles within mythos, the dead in “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” are thoroughly lost before a mythos that has turned predatory.

In this explicit nod toward the classical epic we see the fundamental relationship between mythos and ethos in its most distilled form. To say that the inexorable presence of a monistic mythos, impervious to opposition or alteration, is perhaps the defining gesture of *Lord Weary’s Castle* is not to say that the volume is a modern epic, but rather that Lowell presents the reader with a work whose affinities with epic are gestural and structural rather than formal or narratological. What matters above all is the presence of embattled ethos struggling against the

overwhelming totality of mythos, which threatens poet, traveler, oxen, Christ, and sailors alike. This is the fundamental theme on which all of Lowell's works are to some extent a variation. The rest of this chapter will explore the way the same epic dynamic plays itself out in Lowell's later work.

The Threat of the Ancestor in *Life Studies*

Conventional wisdom long suggested that *Life Studies* is Lowell's most significant work as well as his best-wrought. The former premise is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: the volume's fame, from its initial publication through the present day, has lured several generations of poets into learning it more or less by heart. Its status among contemporary poetry is something akin to that of Sgt. Pepper among popular music: groundbreaking and game-changing at the time, and revered as such for an indefinite period afterwards even once its more radical formal elements have been thoroughly assimilated into the language of mainstream art.

The assertion that *Life Studies* represents Lowell at his poetic best springs, I believe, from some lingering notion that it is the most authentically Lowell-like of Lowell's many books. The tacit reasoning here is uncomfortably circular. Fans of the tone, diction, and matter of *Life Studies*—all of which are, admittedly, brilliant—were quick to see earlier Lowell as simply trying too hard (too much bombast, too much rhetoric, too much form) and later Lowell as coming up short (bleakness, myopia, repetition). The book became the one authentic touchstone by which to measure all the others, putting *Life Studies* in the uncomfortable position of representing the ideal blend of artifice (free verse, clear language, acute and discernible imagery)

and honesty (true family history, true pathological history, true erotic history) which Lowell's other volumes purportedly fail to achieve.¹¹⁸

But *Life Studies* in its essential gesture is not so radically different from Lowell's other works. True, the locus of ethos shifts away from oxen, Quakers, preachers, and sheriffs onto a pseudo-authentic "I", while the locus of mythos shifts from God and fate onto family and life history. Yet the dynamic between the two remains remarkably stable. The players have changed their costumes, the lighting is altered, the drama continues.

The volume's first poem, "Beyond the Alps," quietly and in rather subversive terms announces the paralyzing fear of mythos that will govern the rest of the book, as well as introducing an aspect of tragic envy for those who, through faith or at least self-denial, live free from the knowledge of the adversity that mythos presents. This first poem is often read as a triumphant rejection of, or a declaration of independence from, the myths and pageantry of the Catholic church, which in turn may easily be read as a metonym for Lowell's earlier poetics. However, such a reading leaves much unaccounted for. The poem takes place "On the train from *Rome to Paris. 1950, the year Pius XII defined the dogma of Mary's bodily assumption.*" The thought of Mary's physical body drifting up to heaven like a balloon is too much for Lowell to take, and one of his reasons for breaking finally with the church; it is a detail too baroque, too

¹¹⁸ Alan Williamson, writing during Lowell's later post-Notebook phase, states a similar case thus: "Life Studies was a conscious attempt at such a breakthrough, by the infusion of apparently arbitrary personal detail, suggestive but less reducible than traditional symbolism, and by the elevation of private honesty to an aesthetic criterion, not the opposite but the creative contrary of craft. . . . [A] whole generation of younger poets seized on Lowell's method of escape, and, understandably, newer critics have arisen to exalt *Life Studies* (sometimes at the expense of Lowell's more recent work), and to surround it with a new aesthetic terminology and doctrine." *Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 59-60.

bombastic, and it is no surprise that the poet in the early '50s changed the outward trappings of his poetry as drastically as he changed his formal religious affiliations.

“Beyond the Alps” is rich with details, but they are autonomous details of the everyday rather than aspects of the transcendent:

The Holy Father dropped his shaving glass,
and listened. His electric razor purred,
his pet canary chirped on his left hand.

(LS, 113-114)

With these images of the utterly sublunary, the messily corporeal, and the petty advances of the modern age, Lowell snatches Pius XII down from his pedestal of infallibility and into the same plane as the bodies that age, rot, and go mad throughout *Life Studies*. Like Mussolini in the first stanza, he is “one of us / only, pure prose.” The pope does not even dwell on the heights of secular grandeur: in the all-too-real canary and the mechanical razor we hear an echo, and through it a negation, of the legendary golden songbird that Yeats evokes as a symbol of the bygone pinnacle of human civilization in both “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium.”

We might rest content with still-young Lowell taking a giddy swipe or two at the paternal authority figure of his Catholic days, but revenge does not produce good poetry; unsurprisingly, there is something more at play here. The key to the poem’s structure is the series of volitional statements that extends through the first two stanzas and vanishes in the third. Cautious reading reveals that the speaker is leaving Rome reluctantly: “Much against my will / I left the City of God where it belongs.” Perhaps there is irony here, but if so then it is of the double-edged sort. “Much” is almost too much, and “City of God” is a suspect phrase from a nascent unbeliever, but lingering discontent belies the vitriol: “Life changed to landscape” is as sad a phrase as any in Lowell’s works, especially at the start of a volume titled *Life Studies*. The sense of loss runs keener than the sense of leaving, and the sneer of the apostate is a thin veil for the pain of the

exile. There is sorrow, too, in the clinical word “landscape,” a double-take which reduces the poem’s “fallow alpine snow” to the anesthetic idea of itself. The agent of this transition, at least poetically, is the train’s staff:

. . . I watched our Paris Pullman lunge
moonling across fallow Alpine snow.
O bella Roma! I saw our stewards go
forward on tiptoe banging on their gongs.
Life changed to landscape. Much against my will
I left the City of God where it belongs.

Fellow travelers, ferrymen, wardens—the image of the “stewards” is as complex as the metaphorical potential of the train ride. Yet regardless of how we read them, the tiptoeing stewards cut meek, timid, even awkward figures against the grandiosity of the mountains and the sincere apostrophe “O bella Roma!”¹¹⁹ They move as though frightened to waken some great terror, while “banging on their gongs” in an empty feint of efficacy that fails to embolden even themselves. This image of futility—anticipated by the Swiss giving up on Everest in the poem’s opening lines—transforms the speaker’s apostasy and makes his westward flight an empty rather than a triumphant gesture. The transition from “fallow Alpine snow” to “landscape” runs parallel to this shift in the poem’s consciousness. The world itself becomes a frightening place. Even the authority of popes and dictators is meaningless beside the enormous threat of existence, of mythos, of the empty idea of “landscape.” The speaker’s reluctance to leave Rome is his reluctance to let “life” become subordinate to “IS.”

¹¹⁹ Assuming sincerity seems to be the only way to redeem this snippet of gondola-song sentimentality. If read ironically, it is mere drivel. If read sincerely, it is at least a tragically thwarted gesture toward redemption.

Yet here, as elsewhere, Lowell's poetics is one of consciousness rather than metaphysics. The poem may believe in the absolute truth of its vision, but it also admits the felicitous possibility of seeing things in another light:

I envy the conspicuous
waste of our grandparents on their grand tours—
long-haired Victorian sages accepted the universe,
while breezing on their trust funds through the world.

The socio-economics of this passage are a smokescreen; the last line is the least important, a witty afterthought, perhaps, to lighten the blow. The speaker's "envy" is not for the "trust funds" but rather for the "breezing." This statement of jealous longing is the poem's second volitional claim. The speaker, now no prophet, is hardly thrilled to possess an unpleasant and empty truth. "Long-haired Victorian sages" conjures a generation of late Romantics whose poets were less possessed of doubt than those of Lowell's modern age, whose revolutions were built on assertion rather than negation. To "accept the universe" is, of course, neither to approve of nor to condemn it, but merely to recognize it for what it is, prior to subsequent judgments.¹²⁰ This is precisely what the speaker in "Beyond the Alps" is unable, or unwilling, to do. The struggle against mythos is also a struggle against the existence of mythos, whether Catholic or Romantic, and Lowell, while rejecting all their postulates, can still envy the ease of their vision. That is not the same as envying them, of course: we are free to parse "conspicuous waste of our grandparents" as either objective or subjective genitive, one of which is far more generous than the other. But the narrow, unsatisfying glimpse of a more felicitous worldview that the poem

¹²⁰ The phrase itself is associated with Margaret Fuller, famously via William James: "'I accept the universe' is reported to have been a favorite utterance of our New England transcendentalist, Margaret Fuller; and when someone repeated this phrase to Thomas Carlyle, his sardonic comment is said to have been: 'Gad! she'd better!'" It would be typical of Lowell's wit to have in mind not only the quotation but also the wry retort. (William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 41.

offers in these lines ultimately emphasizes the sublime threat of the poem's emergent worldview, in which mythos and the world are things that terrify even Pullman porters.

The third volitional claim centers on a pair of rhetorical questions in the second stanza. The scene shifts abruptly back in time as well as back to Rome:

When the Vatican made Mary's assumption dogma,
the crowds at San Pietro screamed Papa.

This couplet, which opens the stanza, intentionally falls flat on its face through its dry, declarative tone and its doggerel slant rhyme. Holy mysteries may still have a place in Lowell's poetics—legalistic declarations of their validity do not. Following the passage about the razor and the canary, the poem continues:

The lights of science couldn't hold a candle
to Mary risen—at one miraculous stroke,
angel-wing'd, gorgeous as a jungle bird!
But who believed this? Who could understand?

This purple patch of angel-wings and jungle birds is itself unbelievable, especially after the flatness of the stanza's opening. But the poem's main objection is not to the prettiness of it all, or to the fact that it makes bad poetry (or even poor prose—at least "skirt-mad" Mussolini has the redemptive fault of conspicuous humanity), but rather to the empty, meaningless, and world-denying usurpation of mythos by a prosaic agent who has neither means nor license to tamper with the sublimity of IS. While real and deadly Everest still looms unscaled, a man with an electric razor dismisses gravity with a word. To lie about the world and turn its threats to niceties is a mortal sin in Lowell's poetics. Yet in the questions—"But who believed this? Who could understand?"—we hear a note of purity that clashes strangely with the callous mockery of the preceding lines. Some do believe this—some think they can understand:

Pilgrims still kissed Saint Peter's brazen sandal.
The Duce's lynched, bare, booted skull still spoke.

In the hearts of others, if not the speaker's, there is room for fictions and comfortable mendacities. The two fictions here mentioned—the paternalistic authority figure of the church (though rejected by Lowell) and the paternalistic authority figure of the state (though rejected by the people)—prefigure many of *Life Studies*' encounters with history, family, and authority, as well as anticipating how they may remain objects of irrational reverence even in the face of insurrectionary ethos. Moreover, the shift from Pius XII and his electric shaver to Peter's foot and Mussolini's skull shows the terrifying process of sublimation by which a mere character may become part of, if not one with the essence of, the oppressive entirety of mythos. Both dead men have become monuments of themselves (rather recently in Mussolini's case) and therefore part of the collective social/historical/reverent consciousness that is the single great adversary in Lowell's poetics. Even Pius XII, of whose present and future fame the poem has no doubt, is beginning the transition from upstart meddler to part of the very mythos with which he had no right to tamper in the first place. The process, when seen in this light, is terrifying, and it is no wonder that the poem betrays a note of envy for those who "believed this," who, like the "Victorian sages" of stanza one, can simply "accept the universe."

Yet the poem, even while declaring it, can neither admit nor accept this envy, and so the stanza must end with the image of the faithful as livestock or prisoners bound for slaughter or execution: "God herded his people to the coup de grâce." This is the breaking point of the tension between apostasy and envy, and the poem's third and final stanza contains none of the complex and contradictory volition of the first two. Instead, ethos, character, is drained of all agency, and the speaker of the poem recedes into an impotent sentience divorced from the self that struggled and longed through the first two stanzas:

Tired of the querulous hush-hush of the wheels,
the blar-eyed ego kicking in my berth

lay still, and saw Apollo plant his heels
on terra firma through the morning's thigh . . .

Ethos, the “blear-eyed ego,” lies exhausted, and mythos, as the flashiest of the classical gods, appears corporeally with the morning sun. The speaker, however, can only report the presence of these two grand antagonists. The struggle is not his, exactly, but that of his now externalized ego. Herein lies one of the defining features of Lowell’s characteristic variation on the age-old theme of ethos vs. mythos. Lowell’s “I” is ultimately not the hero who strives against mythos, but rather a witness to the struggle. The following image of each retreating mountaintop as a “fire-branded socket of the Cyclops’ eye” reminds us that the speaker here is not Odysseus, and has no more authority to wound mythos than Pius XII had to defy gravity. With Minerva cast as “the miscarriage of the brain,” and Paris, “our black classic, breaking up / like killer kings on an Etruscan cup,” the poem concludes by plunging the twin pinnacles of mythos (the gods themselves) and ethos (Paris, the holy city of humanism) together into the dark cyclone of meaningless epic antagonism that haunts Life Studies throughout.

Many of these sentiments are echoed several pages later in the much shorter lyric “Inauguration Day: January 1953.” Even more entwined and in tune with current public events than “Beyond the Alps,” which at least masquerades as a private declaration of poetic independence, “Inauguration Day” assumes a public tone through the minimal intrusion of a subjective “I” as well as through its conspicuous apostrophe to Ulysses S. Grant and, of course, its use of Eisenhower’s inauguration as its purported occasion. Through this almost obsessive political focus, as well as through its broken, almost-sonnet structure, “Inauguration Day” anticipates the poetics that Lowell espouses a decade and a half later in Notebook 1967—68. This is yet another sign that the formally divergent phases of Lowell’s career are, for the most part,

different vessels for the same fluid: in the Life Studies era, Lowell had already experimented with fitting his perennial themes into a terse, sonnet-like structure.

The poem opens with a simple declaration: “The snow had buried Stuyvesant.” The location of the poem’s immediate consciousness is Lower Manhattan’s Stuyvesant Square, not far from Third Avenue (mentioned in line 3). However, this terse statement demands that we read it as more than a picturesque nod toward the weather, especially given the poem’s brevity and Lowell’s aversion to wasting time on the merely picturesque. “Buried,” not “covered,” rings sinister, especially given the poem’s later references to tombs, mass graves, and mausoleums. We are free, then, to read “Stuyvesant” as any relevant thing that can be “buried,” either literally or metaphorically: the square, the statue in the square, the city’s Dutch founder, even the city itself. Some apocalyptic adversary has subsumed New York and all its history. The usual theme of threatening and inexorable mythos is at play here, but we should note that the thing being threatened—a statue like Peter’s, a city like Paris or Rome—is itself a player in the grand construct of mythos. The dynamic is similar to the one that Lowell establishes between Christ and IS in *Lord Weary’s Castle*: however large and imperious a thing, the sum of all is yet greater, and may crush it as though it were an embattled blip of ethos.

“Inauguration Day” also prefigures the Notebook era through its reliance on image associations and dream-logic to create a quasi-surreal fabric that constructs meaning emergently rather than linearly. The “vaults” of line 2, ostensibly subway tunnels, are in league with both the mausoleum and the grave, and the subways themselves have more to do with troubling the dead than conducting the living. The following lines are rich in texture, almost overwhelmingly multivalenced:

. . . I heard
the El’s green girders charge on Third,

Manhattan's truss of adamant,
that groaned in ermine, slumped on want. . . .

(LS, 117)

"I heard," the poem's only nominative first-person, comes out of Lowell's prophetic toolkit; it is the same diction as "I saw the sky descending" or "I saw my city in the Scales," both from "Where the Rainbow Ends" at the end of *Lord Weary's Castle*. If the subways of line 2 trouble the underground world of the dead, the Third Avenue El is itself moribund, a monument to the transitory nature of even the grandest acts of human building. In 1953, it was the last of the city's once-extensive elevated lines to remain in operation, slated to be phased out completely by the middle of the decade. To call such a work "Manhattan's truss of adamant" is a gesture worthy of Ozymandius, and to have it "charge" on Third Avenue is to align it with the futile dead of America's bloody history, especially the Civil War that haunts the next few lines, a waste of life and mobility in the name of mythos and the inexorable forces of history. The El "groaned in ermine, slumped on want" (note the past tense)—in other words, teemed with life. Perhaps there is an echo here of Whitman's Manhattan, but as a half-glimpsed, receding past.

The second half of the poem's octave¹²¹ summons the annihilating force that negates the vision of life in the first half. Ulysses S. Grant, Union general and U.S. president, is called upon as "Cyclonic zero," "God of our armies," and, most damningly, he who "interred / Cold Harbor's blue immortals." Perhaps there is a meaningful contrast here between Stuyvesant, the founder, and Grant, the man of war. Perhaps there is even an implied cultural antagonism between Stuyvesant Park's Lower East Side location and the site of Grant's entombment mere blocks from the intellectual establishment of Columbia University. In either case, the poem casts Grant not as the savior of the Union, but rather as a force akin to Death himself. The Battle of Cold

¹²¹ Yes, it has nine lines, but it earns this sonnet-specific designation through the powerful contrast between its first five and its latter four.

Harbor was the Confederacy's last significant victory in the Civil War, as General Grant sent thousands of Union soldiers to their deaths in a futile charge on the Confederate position. The name of the battle invokes more than the universal horror of war; it particularly conjures a waste of life for no discernible purpose, an exertion of force that accomplishes nothing—pure annihilation.

Read this way, the figure of Grant becomes an avatar of mythos itself: in this case, the unbearable weight of history when viewed as “cyclonic zero” or meaningless destroyer. The final line of the octave—“Horseman, your sword is in the groove!”—places Grant disturbingly, violently, and, from a poetic standpoint, somewhat clumsily on the same conceptual plane as “the El’s green girders,” as though the sword of Death himself is the rail on which the city’s train ride. In either case, the image profoundly denies the typical post-war American dream of societal progress present and past. A homespun American hero appears as Destroyer, while the only Builder present is a Dutchman buried in snow. The dream is dead, stillborn, but more interest still is that America’s own mythos serves as its executioner.

The (five-line) sestet offers three quick images to augment and consolidate this apocalyptic tension. “Ice, ice. Our wheels no longer move” nudges the poem back toward the reality of natural winter, pushing the dream-vision of Ulysses S. Death into the innocuous sphere of metaphor—or else it confirms the brutality of the preceding vision, as actual wheels catch and spin on what we know is Death’s frictionless and inexorable sword. The “fixed stars” like “lack-land atoms” that “split apart” are equally disturbing and multivalenced. These could be the stars themselves, or they could be flakes of falling snow. Either way, the poem freezes them in place—if they are snow, it does this by halting time—and imagines them as atoms at the instant of fission, which in the context of Cold War American culture can only mean the exact inciting

moment of nuclear apocalypse. If these are the stars, then the stage of humanity's suicide is as wide as the cosmos. If these are snowflakes, then the city is iced over with the fallout of an apocalypse that has always already occurred. Either way the image is haunting, cyclical or perhaps even atemporal, and utterly hopeless. The final couplet seals the poem's vision of doom:

and the Republic summons Ike,
the mausoleum in her heart.

Eisenhower, entering office after commanding armies in the war, is the second coming of Grant, a locus of historical *déjà vu* that embodies the whole of the bloody past in the threatened present. The mausoleum at the heart of the Republic is, of course, the tomb of the Republic itself, wrapped endlessly in monuments to its own destruction. History becomes recursive.

"Inauguration Day" is as concise a statement as any of Lowell's view of American mythos: a meaninglessly destructive force whose object is itself; a cyclone in whose winds ethos is hopelessly embattled.

Of course, *Life Studies* as a volume is most famous not for the social and political poems of its first section, but for the personal and familial meditations of Part Four, also titled "Life Studies." Herein are the poems that cemented Lowell's lasting fame and earned his oeuvre the rather misleading title of Confessional poetry.¹²² The construction of the volume as a whole is no accident: the early social/political poems, two of which we have just examined, prime the reader

¹²² Axelrod identifies three key elements of Confessional poetry from Snodgrass onward: "an undisguised exposure of painful personal event, . . . a dialectic of private manner with public manner, . . . and an intimate, unornamented style" (Steven Gould Axelrod, "Starting Over: Learning from Williams," in *Modern Critical Views: Robert Lowell*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 126. While this is largely true of the very poetries composing "Confessionalism," it also has much in common with the long-established tradition of realist fiction. The central irony in the idea of Confessionalism lies in the fact that the purported shift toward autobiographical veracity overlapped with, and was perhaps even overtaken by, the shift toward the narratologically fictive conventions of the 19th-c. novel and away from the psychological immediacy of the post-Romantic lyric.

to experience the more personal material in Part Four not as free-verse autobiography but as a jarring and unsettling translation of the basic terms of Part One—oppressive mythos, embattled ethos—into the domestic sphere. Mythos here comprises family history, fame, paternalism, class, marriage, even hereditary madness, all of which form a unified force every bit as careless, destructive, and inexorable as war, religion, politics, and the atom bomb.

The introductory poem of the “Life Studies” section, “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow,” accomplishes feats of subtle terror through skillful modulations in tone and a half-surreal play of images that blend into one another, ultimately lending a sinister tinge even to lighthearted signifiers of innocence. Written in four parts, the poem presents a syncretic logic not unlike that of the volume itself, with different sections informing one another to create an emergent picture both more complete and more frightening than any section on its own. Meaning behaves rhizomatically rather than linearly, and so our reading will progress not from beginning to end, but within a number of productive relations between the poem’s images. We can also imagine the poem as something of a pyramid or iceberg, with its few overt assertions as a peak supported by the broad and obscure mass of its subtler observations that masquerade as trivia. Meaning flows downward from the peak while also pressing downward from the base—the most salient points of terror color the everyday, while the sinister tinge to the everyday ensures that the salient points of terror belong to a world both complex and believable.

The explanation of the poem’s title, though hardly a surprise to the reader more canny than the poem’s 5-year-old consciousness, comes toward the end of the final section: “My uncle was dying at twenty-nine.” The assertion is abrupt, separated by a stanza break from a long descriptive aside about decorative pre-war posters. The poem’s syncretic logic is at play even here: the reader immediately grasps the absurdity of these artifacts’ endurance in a world where

young men die of incurable diseases, as well as the irony of Devereux becoming part of the irretrievable past of which his collected posters are an echo. Now just still an agent, a master over history and the world, the dying man will soon become historical detritus. Already he appears “As if posed for ‘the engagement photograph’”, a reverse echo of a future in which he lives on only in an album or box of family photographs. His surroundings and trappings seem to grow more vivid as he himself fades to a lifeless grey, or at least the black-and-white of a photograph. His clothing is described in a double-take that dwells not only on color but on vivacity and animation:

His blue coat and white trousers
grew sharper and straighter.
His coat was a blue jay’s tail,
his trousers were solid cream from the top of the bottle.
(LS, 163-167)

All this contrasts bitterly with the preceding line: “His face was putty.” Devereux’s ghastly, lifeless hue emerges from its own interaction with the roiling life around him. The putty color of his face is but the first stage of the final, flattening heat-death as he is divorced from the productive oppositions that drive the living cosmos:

My hands were warm, then cool, on the piles
of earth and lime,
a black pile and a white pile. . . .
Come winter,
Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color.

Death, here, is what happens when entropy wins, and the poem displays a keen awareness that it is the logical future state of all the world’s systems, immanent in the present.¹²³ Even 5-year-old

¹²³ In a contradictory though complementary reading to the one I offer here, Stephen Yenser sees in the poem a subjectivity that longs for “a realm where things are immutable and perfect, where there is only ‘the one color.’” Even if we take this longing in the sense of a quasi-Freudian death-drive, however, it still understates the entropic terror of the situation and the child’s traumatic

Lowell himself is poised as both the agent and the victim of this leveling. With one hand on the warm black earth and the other on the cool white lime, he is experiencing, even if only conceptually, the warming of the cool and the cooling of the warm—and he is poised as a conductor between the two, the short circuit that drains the system of its vital potential. He is, therefore, not only a witness to death, but a participant as well—if not an agent, then at least a future site of a process that the poem conceives of as an ergative verb.¹²⁴

But death itself is not the central terror of “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow. Rather, the poem’s consciousness is plagued by a new and terrifying awareness not only of the process of death but also of the presence of all the dead—not only the once-living, but the cultural, historical, and syntagmatic detritus that they have left behind. When the poem states, “I wasn’t a child at all— / unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina / in the Golden House of Nero. . . .,” it evokes a frozen symbol of power, wealth, and historicity as a metaphor—nearly a metonym—for Lowell’s grandfather’s farm and all its cultural trappings. Agrippina, who was murdered by her own son, the emperor Nero, seems an odd choice of figures with whom to identify a five-year-old boy. The exact set of relations involved, though, serves as a useful key to some of the poem’s potential meanings. To be the defenseless victim of Nero—that is, absolute power, an incarnate guard, and the body of the State—is to be in a position no different from the Christ or the oxen of “The Holy Innocents”: a blip of ethos, helpless before the juggernaut of

complicity. *Circle to Circle: The Poetry of Robert Lowell* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 144-5.

¹²⁴ That is to say: one (Hodgkin’s disease, Death) can do it, it can be done to one (Devereux); or it can be something that one (speaker, poet, reader, world) simply undergoes. English has a number of ergative verbs, which can be either transitive or intransitive: open, move, break, to name a few. Die is not one, of course—we have kill for the transitive—but the action the poem imagines requires one.

mythos. To be the mother of Nero as well, though, is a more complicated proposition. Through it, the poem hints at the way in which the whole of the oppressive past must be carried onward and re-birthed by the young if it is to exist at all. In spite of being itself all-powerful, mythos relies on the child's mind and, perhaps, the poet's pen to perpetuate itself. This serves as a profound reminder that Lowell's mythos, or any, is a fundamentally human construct, not to be confused with, say, Robinson Jeffers's conception of an amoral and inhuman natural world that has no intercourse with culture or society. Lowell's mythos, here as elsewhere, is both the child and the bane of humankind.

In "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," mythos emerges from a conglomerate swarm of cultural facets rather than manifesting itself as a single threatening presence. This is one of the central characteristics of Lowell's Life Studies style, one that deserves more discussion than it has received: while a poem such as "Inauguration Day" features an apocalyptic figure (Ulysses S. Grant) who would be comfortably at home in *Lord Weary's Castle*, the later Life Studies poems transubstantiate mythos into a vast array of minutiae. It is present in the "severe / war-uniform of a volunteer Canadian officer" that Uncle Devereux wears as he boards up the cabin—the image manages to contain the brutality of the Great War, the relative safety of upper-class North American volunteerism, and, with the irony of hindsight, a touch of awareness of the moribund class system that even in the New World declined rapidly between the war's end and the middle of the century. The cabin itself contains posters of an era both recent and bygone, which light from the doorway "riddled"—a verb no doubt chosen to evoke the violence of wartime gunfire. When we first see "Mr. Punch" (the mascot of Punch magazine) "tossing off a decanter of Scotch," the image itself is no doubt comedic—he is described as "a watermelon in hockey tights"—but context darkens it. In the next poster, "La

Belle France in a red, white and blue toga / was accepting the arm of her “protector,” / the ingenu and porcine Edward VII.” Here is the war again, this time painted in terms almost as cartoonish as Mr. Punch, though with a tint of jingoism rather than comedy. The poster’s easy patriotism and substitution of sterilized chivalry for the horrors of war feel nearly as frivolous as the “pre-war music hall belles” that follow, who are complete with “goose necks, glorious signatures, beauty-moles, / and coils of hair like rooster tails.” The clincher of the set, however, is the last of these stained glass windows into the past:

The finest poster was two or three young men in khaki kilts
being bushwhacked on the veldt—
They were almost life-size. . . .

Note the horrifying absence of an active verb in the first of these lines. The poster does not show, display, contain—it is the young soldiers; it summons them wholly, from the grave of history, without the interventions of symbols like La Belle France or even the physical metonym of an officer’s uniform. The final experience is direct, and the poem’s boyhood-consciousness sees them as “almost life-size.” It is, of course, only the poem’s parallel adult consciousness that glimpses the historical significance of the poster and invites the reader to associate it with the Boer War, one of imperial pre-war Europe’s final bloody wastes of flesh and civilization. This last poster, the most overt, bleeds backward into the others, or rather is the fulfillment of their dark prolepsis: though most likely the earliest of the posters in an historical timeline, on the conceptual plane it is the latest, acting as the voice of the adult Lowell in the decade after his conscientious objection to WWII and before his vehement public objection to the war in Vietnam. “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow” is not, however, an anti-war poem; rather, the brutal bellicosity of recent history belongs to the greater horror of mythos, the Nero that the child-consciousness mothers through the very act of perceiving his surroundings.

The mixed temporality of the Boer War poster draws the reader's attention to another crucial feature of the poem: even its basic temporal structure embodies the terrifying weight of past history and present mythos. To begin with, the poem's immediate consciousness is split between two iterations of its subject, one in the implied authorial present of the reminiscing "I," and one in the subjective present (past to author and reader) of the perceiving child. The poem's extradiegetic speaker does not comment extensively on the meaning of the poem's recalled events. His presence acts as a sort of ironizing ghost, reminding the reader to imagine how the events and images might seem after several decades have passed. The poem's subjectivity still belongs almost entirely to the child, whose foggy apprehensions and half-glimpsed meanings acutely remind the reader that the world's horrors and the immense threat of mythos are present even before they are recognized as such. Lines such as these—

My perfection was the Olympian
poise of my models in the imperishable autumn
display windows
of Rogers Peet's boys' store below the State House
in Boston. . . .

—make use of conspicuously sophisticated poetic diction while still containing no thoughts, information, or perception beyond that to which, though in different terms, the five-year-old consciousness would have access. The same applies even to the admittedly more "adult" details offered about Great Aunt Sarah in part III of the poem:

Forty years earlier,
twenty, auburn headed,
grasshopper notes of genius!
Family gossip says Aunt Sarah
tilted her archaic Athenian nose
and jilted an Astor.

The child-consciousness of the poem could not possibly understand the context or implications of these data, yet it is the very sort of gossip that the inquisitive young mind might overhear and file away for future analysis. In spite of the eloquent presentation of lines such as these (one can hardly imagine Lowell adopting a faux-infantile prattle of the sort Wordsworth found so charming), the extradiegetic, older version of the speaker is careful not to interject with information or perceptions wholly alien to the poem's recollected present.

In addition to this double-temporality, the poem's present moment stretches and distorts to contain a seemingly limitless conglomerate of political and familial history.¹²⁵ The present (of the child-consciousness), "One afternoon in 1922," is capacious almost to the point of absurdity. Even the designation "afternoon" is misleading, too broad—the entire world of the poem is contained within what could well be a single instant as the child sits on the porch with his hands on the warm black pile and the cool white one. He is there in the beginning, there in the end, as though no time has passed. In the poem's perspective, the animate action of people and the inanimate stasis of objects are treated similarly, as part of a single frozen moment:

Our farmer was cementing a root-house under the hill.
One of my hands was cool on a pile
of black earth, the other warm
on a pile of lime. All around me
were the works of my Grandfather's hands:
snapshots of his Liberty Bell silver mine;
his high school at Stukkert am Neckar;
stogie-brown beams; fools' gold nuggets . . .

¹²⁵ According to Marjorie Perloff, "Lowellian time is extremely hard to define even though many critics have noted the poet's preoccupation with the past, his consciousness of history, his dialogue with his 'ancestral voices' . . . The past . . . is rarely less ugly, unpleasant, or agonizing than the present . . . If the present depends totally on the past, then perhaps time is a meaningless continuum leading nowhere." *The Poetic Art of Robert Lowell* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 47.

—and so forth. Even the extended aside about Great Aunt Sarah, which occupies all of part III, exists mostly in the perfective aspect. The bringing of the dummy piano into the house, Grandmother’s tone-deafness, the jilting of the Astor, the abandoned performance at Symphony Hall—all of this exists in the realm of the already-having-happened, and therefore as a property of the capacious present. Once the reader recognizes that the same dynamic applies to the Boer War, the Great War, the social order of the previous century, and the preceding generations of wealthy, powerful ancestors, the weight on the present becomes almost unbearable. Mythos—in this case, the accumulated weight of the entire pertinent past—weighs so heavily on the present that it might crush it, and the perceiving subject—in this case, a five-year-old boy—is both subject to and bearer of the burden.

Through this complicated mechanism, “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow” sets up the central crisis which most of the rest of the “Life Studies” section attempts, and ultimately fails, to resolve. In this light, Lowell’s “Confessionalism” has little to do with the poet’s private life and family history; rather, it is a bold attempt to explain the omnipresent threat of mythos in terms of its relationship to the personal rather than, as in *Lord Weary’s Castle*, the religious, universal, and apocalyptic.

The following poem, “Dunbarton,” is the logical extension of the previous one. Uncle Devereux is dead, buried; grandfather and child go together to visit the dead. A large part of the poem’s charm and efficacy lies in its catalog of ancestors and details of the past, a sort of condensed version of Lowell’s technique in the prose section of Life Studies, “91 Revere Street.” Several of the graveyard’s dead are summoned by name:

At the graveyard, a suave Venetian Christ
gave a sheepdog’s nursing patience
to Grandfather’s Aunt Lottie,
his Mother, the stone but not the bones

of his Father, Francis.

(LS, 168-169)

And a description of the “disused millpond” near the grave gives occasion to invoke a more distant ancestor:

a reddish blur,
like the ever-blackening wine-dark coat
in our portrait of Edward Winslow
once sheriff for George the Second,
the sire of bankrupt Tories.

The poem’s intimation of bygone eras as only a step or two removed from the present even blurs the line between the living and the dead, as dead history emerges through but also claims as one of its own “Our helper, Mr. Burroughs,” who “had stood with Sherman at Shiloh.” The figure of Mr. Burroughs occupies a liminal space between life and death, as his roles in the poem are to help tend the graveyard, to represent a bloody conflict of the rapidly receding past, and to possess a strange array of mock-ceremonial libations:

his thermos of shockless coffee
was milk and grounds;
his illegal home-made claret
was as sugary as grape jelly
in a tumbler capped with paraffin.

We need not ascribe specific meaning to the milk or the wine in order to notice that both are rich with symbolic potential, and that Mr. Burroughs seems to act as some sort of mythic cup-bearer rather than a thirsty old man. In short, the graveyard is haunted: by the presence of the dead, the associative evocation of the long-dead, and the liminal figure of shady Mr. Burroughs.

The weight of the dead at the heart of the poem is overwhelming. Coupling this with its understated beginning and its fearful ending, the poem forms a crisis of ethos confronting mythos in the guise of family history. Misread, the poem’s opening could serve as a

heartwarming exposition of a loving bond between grandfather and grandchild. Given the rest of the poem, however, the role-swapping that these early lines describe is disturbing:

When Uncle Devereux died,
Daddy was still on sea-duty in the Pacific;
it seemed spontaneous and proper
for Mr. MacDonald, the farmer,
Karl, the chauffeur, and even my Grandmother
to say, “your Father.” They meant my Grandfather.

The child himself is not simply being promoted in the family hierarchy; rather, vacuums in the family structure are drawing him violently into positions he should not naturally occupy. On the one hand, he is taking the place of his recently deceased Uncle Devereux; on the other hand, he is taking the place of his own absent father. Both gestures tug him an uncomfortable step closer to the overwhelming past that haunts the middle section of the poem. To rise higher on the family tree is to be closer to mythos, to death, to “Edward Winslow / once sheriff for George the Second.” Awareness of this process is a central anxiety of mid-life; by forcing a child to undergo the same shift prematurely, the poem defamiliarizes the common phenomenon and presents more clearly the underlying relationship between ethos and mythos.

The end of the poem offers an unsatisfactory attempt at escape from this oppressive knowledge as the boy hunts for newts with his grandfather’s cane. The idea of escape from mythos through identity with the animal world is one that Lowell revisits more thoroughly in “Skunk Hour,” which we will examine shortly. Here, in “Dunbarton,” the newts offer a horrible transformation of both the dead and the living, an annihilation of both possibilities in a devastating amalgamation of both. Using the cane that is “more a weapon than a crutch,”

I lanced it in the fauve ooze for newts.
In a tobacco tin after capture, the umber yellow mature newts
lost their leopard spots,
lay grounded as numb

as scrolls of candied grapefruit peel.

The graveyard dirt here is cast as “ooze,” a word so tied to the idea of the primordial that we are free to read it both as that which covers the dead and as that from which the rudiments of life emerge. The young newts maturing in captivity take on a corpse-like appearance both through their ill coloring and through their static horizontality. They are life and death together, living symbols of the world that the child has prematurely discovered through the pressure of mythos and family history. In a final attempt to flout this inexorable knowledge, the child imagines himself within the simplified newt-reality:

I saw myself as a young newt,
neurasthenic, scarlet
and wild in the wild coffee-colored water.

To do so is easier than to see himself as a child, which the whole of the human family syntagm insists he no longer is. The gambit seems to fail, however, as the social world intrudes with an echo of Mr. Burroughs’s coffee in spite of the adamant doubling of “wild,” a futile plea for reality to be a less human affair.

The poem’s final lines, in which the child “cuddled like a paramour / in my Grandfather’s bed,” mark a complete regression from this newt-fantasy back to the anxieties of human ethos, although there is a touch of comfort in the warmth of the image and in the grandfather “scout[ing] around the chattering greenwood stove.” After all, humanity, the family, Grandfather are not the threatening presence that the child experiences and tries to escape. Because the mythos of family history is quite distinct from the ethos of actual family, the unsignifying simplicity of Grandfather tending the stove allows for a moment’s reprieve from mythos in the poem’s final lines, even if it is too little too late for the child’s embattled consciousness.

Other Life Studies poems take different tacks in their explorations of the tensions between ethos and mythos. “Commander Lowell (1887–1950),” a sort of elegy, not quite a eulogy, for the poet’s father, details the elder Lowell’s decent from “successful enough to be lost / in the mob of ruling-class Bostonians” to an emasculated has-been who sings in the tub and buys new cars with each lost job. The poem is certainly not about financial ruin or destitution; the reader gets the impression that the shifts in the family’s fortunes are syntagmatic rather than arithmetical.

Money itself is incidental to the poem:

Night after night,
à la clarté déserte de sa lampe,
he slid his ivory Annapolis slide rule
across a pad of graphs—
piker speculations! In three years
he squandered sixty thousand dollars.

(LS, 172-174)

The point of these lines lies not in the lost money, but in the irony of lost social standing. The figure is significant only insofar as it reminds us that Commander Lowell had sixty thousand dollars to “squander”—not to lose, but merely to apply frivolously. The Annapolis slide rule, metonym of his former career and status as a Navy engineer, is wholly out of place in half-hearted and ineffectual after-dinner speculation. Even the touch of romanticism offered by the quasi-quotation from Mallarmé descends into bathos, mocking rather than elevating the Commander’s insipid pursuits. All in all, the poem is a portrait of a man whom mythos has pushed completely aside, and who has accepted his defeat in a complacent and utterly un-heroic manner for which the poem has nothing but scorn. If the primary sight of ethos’s struggle in many of Lowell’s poems is the poet-consciousness, the speaking or observing “I” that represents no third party or persona, than “Commander Lowell” establishes its titular character as a sort of

anti-poet. Perhaps this is nothing but a cheap Freudian jab from son to father, but it does help illustrate the poet's insistence on the necessity of struggle against the oppression of mythos.

"Sailing Home from Rapallo," on the other hand, Lowell's poem on the death of his mother, explores the rather impersonal force by which mythos subsumes the individuality of the dead. There is no real struggle here unless it is the struggle of the observing "I" to make sense of the unfolding process. The victim of mythos, Lowell's mother, is dead already:

When I embarked from Italy with my Mother's body,
the whole shoreline of the Golfo di Genova
was breaking into fiery flower.

(LS, 179-180)

This vernal scene serves merely as a final glimpse at the world of the living, though. The poem quickly abandons Europe for the country of the dead in America:

While the passengers were tanning
on the Mediterranean in deck-chairs,
our family cemetery in Dunbarton
lay under the White Mountains
in the sub-zero weather.

It is important to bear in mind that in Lowell's poetics, America is the Old World. His primal myths are the Revolution, Jonathan Edwards, the Civil War. Europe exists more as an escape, the property of wealthy travelers (like these tanning passengers) or soul-sick seekers (as in "Beyond the Alps"). To come back to frozen New England, then, is to come back to the harshness of reality, to leave the illusion of warmth beyond the sea. As in "Beyond the Alps," the physical journey here is a psychical one as well: the tenderness of the poem's opening—

Your nurse could only speak Italian,
but after twenty minutes I could imagine your final week,
and tears ran down my cheeks. . . .

—gives way to the brutal reality of a New England cemetery where “the soil was changing to stone” in the dead of winter. This poignant image installs the stasis of the tomb in place of the more dynamic image of the “family cemetery.” The latter, as glimpsed in “Dunbarton,” at least has some commerce with the living; the former, offered here, belongs to the dead alone. The graveyard is no longer the place where Grandfather and the young Lowell raked leaves together. Rather, it is a repository and conglomeration of the dead, whose collective weight lends to the place a sense of oppressive presence:

A fence of iron spear-hafts
black-bordered its mostly Colonial grave-slates.
The only “unhistoric” soul to come here
was Father, now buried beneath his recent
unweathered pink-veined slice of marble.

Even Commander Lowell, the genetic stranger, seems out of place here, so thorough and so present is the historical weight of “Mother’s relatives: / twenty or thirty Winslows and Starks.” When the poem tells us that “Frost had given their names a diamond edge,” we see how death and time reify and crystallize the signifiers that once were mere aspects of the living. This is the future that Lowell’s mother belongs to, or perhaps even her present: subsumption into the frozen body of mythos, and an afterlife as the substance of history itself.¹²⁶

The culmination of *Life Studies*, however, is its final poem, “Skunk Hour.” Here more than anywhere else in the volume, mythos exists as a threatening presence whose effects on ethos

¹²⁶ This particular aspect of the volume’s relationship with ancestry is perhaps its most tangible point of connection with the tradition of 19th-century realist fiction to which it owes more than to any newfangled doctrine of “Confessionalism. As Perloff puts it, “In *Life Studies*, one concludes, Lowell is trying to fuse the romantic mode, which projects the poet’s “I” in the act of self-discovery, and the Tolstoyan or Chekhovian mode, usually called realism. I would posit that it is his superb manipulation of the realistic convention, rather than the titillating confessional content, that is responsible for the so-called breakthrough of *Life Studies* and that distinguishes Lowell’s confessional poetry from the work of his less accomplished disciples.” (Perloff, 86).

are circumstantially and emotionally devastating. Furthermore, ethos in “Skunk Hour” inhabits a space wider than that of the self or the family, projecting the poem away from the personal and toward the universal. Finally, “Skunk Hour” posits a solution to the problem of mythos yet at the same time deems this solution impossible to achieve: understanding the problem is not the same as solving it, and grasping the truth is not the same as escaping it.

Lowell divides the poem into eight uniform stanzas, and at first glance there seems to be a clear division between the novelistic social observation of the first four stanzas and the “confessional” details of the latter four. The first half features three coastal characters, “Nautilus Island’s hermit heiress,” “our summer millionaire,” and “our fairy decorator”; other than the observational tone and the collective “we,” the poem’s speaker is wholly absent. The latter half, on the other hand, has no players other than the poem’s “I” and its skunks. It is easy and even tempting to look at the poem and say that it is simply about society and isolation. All the third-person characters are outcasts of one sort or another in spite of their masquerading as the fabric of Castine society, and the speaker, when he appears, is a neurotic night-stalking creep whose “mind’s not right.” Only the skunks, strangers to the alienation of the human world, experience life without fear and complication. The animal becomes the noble savage, and the poem, when read in this light, ends on a note of escapist nostalgia.

This reading is wildly insufficient for a number of reasons. It is disappointing: even before we see why, we know that the poem is better than this. It is simplistic: the complex speaker becomes one more in a series of case studies, and the relationship of the “I” to the preceding characters goes neglected. Worst of all, it wildly overvalues stanzas five and six, a brief glimpse at the speaker’s madness or mania that is far less developed or emphasized than the extended “confessional” meditations on madness earlier in *Life Studies*—e.g., “Waking in the

Blue” or “Man and Wife.” In short, this is not really a poem about Robert Lowell or even a fictional version of him. Noticeably different in tone, structure, and methodology, it stands out not as a paragon of the Life Studies style but as an anomaly—a coda. With this in mind, we can read “Skunk Hour” as an explanatory afterward or end-note to Life Studies, one that distills the volume’s essential gestures of threatening mythos and embattled ethos into a series of atemporal snapshots that freeze time and project the poem away from the personal and into the sphere of the universal.

The absurdly declarative diction that opens the poem establishes this sense of frozen time early on. The only sense of a time other than the present exists in the word “still,” a temporal indicator that offers a vague gesture toward a past that only really matters insofar as it is identical with the present:

Nautilus Island’s hermit
heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage;
her sheep still graze above the sea.

(LS, 191-192)

These lines also establish a capacious present once we learn that the poem does not take place in winter: the fact of the heiress’s winter residence exists outside of the season to which it pertains. It is useful here to remember the similarly capacious temporality of “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow.” In both cases, an overdetermined present is a conspicuous symptom of the illness that mythos inflicts. Moreover, the heiress is determined to free herself from the symptoms of the human world that surround her. First, rather obviously, she is a hermit. Second, though the poem tells us the social roles of her son and her farmer, she does not appear to interact with either one, diegetically, conceptually, or subjectively. Finally, the only action attributed to her in the poem is:

she buys up all
the eyesores facing her shore,
and lets them fall.

At a glance, this appears to be a tidy solution to the problem of mythos: avoid human society and physically eradicate its signifiers. However, a deep irony undercuts this dynamic and reduces it to a quixotic, mock-heroic gesture. The only glimpse we get of the hermit's subjectivity is her motive for eradicating coastal properties: she is "Thirsting for / the hierarchic privacy / of Queen Victoria's century." In other words, the engine driving her escapism is nothing other than mythos itself: she longs to escape the present social order so she can simulate another, arguably more regimented one. We might even extend this irony to the very essence of the word "hermit," which in nearly every case marks a substitution of one form of mythos for another rather than any sort of absolute escape from oppressive conceptions of humanity.

The next character, the "summer millionaire" who "seemed to leap from an L. L. Bean / catalog," is less developed than the hermit heiress, but deliberately so. His most salient feature is his absence. The poem claims that "we've lost" him, as though he were somehow a feature of the communities first and a sentient subject only second, if at all. His fast and presumably expensive sailboat "was auctioned off to lobstermen." This is a slight detail, but an important one: a crucial signifier that tied him to the social upper class of yachtsmen and affluent summer people is anonymously absorbed into the working-class community. Ties are broken, labels are shed, and the millionaire vanishes completely. Perhaps this marks a sort of escape from mythos, but in the poem's imagination it is an inadequate one. Disappearance is not emancipation, just as non-existence is not freedom. Whatever meaning the millionaire's gesture might have, nature absorbs

it without comment: the stanza ends “A red fox stain covers Blue Hill,” an image related to the millionaire’s actions only through sheer incongruousness.¹²⁷

Even the “fairy decorator” of the fourth stanza is a malcontent entangled with mythos. The singsong tetrameter of “his fishnet’s filled with orange corks” intentionally goes a bit too far in suggesting the frivolity and lightheartedness of his occupation, priming the skeptical reader to see something threatening in the presence of the net. It has ensnared the season itself, the orange corks analogous to the “red fox stain” on Blue Hill. The decorator put them there intentionally, of course, when he “brightens his shop for fall,” but the net, not he, holds them now. In a way, the decorator is the most liberated of the three malcontents in the poem’s first half: his possession of objects alienated from their context (the net, sinister though it may be) and his non-intercourse with the normal workings of social economy (“there is no money in his work”) suggest that he has made for himself a sort of isolation more effective than that of the heiress who longs for “Queen Victoria’s century.” However, of all three he is the only one whose unhappiness is addressed directly: “he’d rather marry” suggests that the decorator, not so unlike the heiress, longs for the bonds of mythos, in this case the regimented customs and mores of (presumably) Protestant heterosexual matrimony. This final gesture transforms the net into a proleptic metaphor, a future echo of the snares of mythos that lie ahead.

Unlike many similar passages in Lowell’s work, the fourth stanza does not end with an ellipsis to indicate an extended pause that might include a change of topic. We might therefore read the fifth stanza of “Skunk Hour,” beginning “One dark night,” as a seamless continuation of

¹²⁷ Lowell mentions in his essay on the poem that “I think the words have sinister and askew suggestions.” I am hesitant to read too much into Lowell’s single sentence, but it does fit nicely with the reading I am offering here. If we take the “red fox stain” not just as an incongruous natural signifier but as a sinister one as well, then it becomes the haunting after-presence of the millionaire’s discontents as well as the bloody aftermath of his self-negating departure—sinister indeed.

the poem's trajectory up to that point. Significantly, this suggests that the subject of the fifth and sixth stanzas—the poem's first-person speaker—is fourth in the chain of characters that includes the “hermit heiress,” the “summer millionaire,” and the “fairy decorator.” Reading this progression as continuous primes us to encounter a speaker whose struggles with mythos compliment the first three. We also know from Lowell's prose that this scene is intended as a secularized variation on the “Dark Night of the Soul” theme—that is, a blind quest precipitated by despair. Of course, each of the previous three characters is likewise blind and in despair. The heiress's senility and upper-class nostalgia prevent her from seeing the intractable and invincible community around her; the millionaire's unstated discontents erase his vision of the coast altogether; and the decorator's listless unproductiveness blinds him to the inherent miseries of the social state he longs for. The poem has primed us to expect the same from the speaker: a central discontent and a correlative myopia.

What actually occurs is subtly but crucially different. Stanzas five and six contain the poem's only explicit grievances from any perspective, and they are acute: not only the pithy “My mind's not right,” but these lines:

. . . I hear
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat. . . .

In a poem full of “ill-spirits,” the speaker is the only one who seems aware of it. On a narratological level, this awareness implies an omniscient “I” to whose consciousness we can then attribute the first four stanzas.¹²⁸ More importantly, stanzas five and six contain these declarations of the speaker's misery, but do not offer the causes or explanations that the reader has every right to hope for. Instead, we must zoom out or consider the poem at a higher narrative

¹²⁸ The alternative would be a poem whose first half was governed by an extradiegetic, third-person consciousness, with an interdiegetic “I” introduced only later.

level in order to understand the source of the speaker's misery. The poem becomes simultaneously more intimate and more removed, more "confessional" and more artificial. The unity of the poem's design can only remain intact if we consider that the first four stanzas themselves contain the root of the speaker's discontent. His knowledge is his sickness: what paralyzes him is the interplay between the threat of mythos and the futility of most attempts at escaping it. What the poem seeks, therefore, is not to find a way out, but to escape from the destructive tension of trying to find a way out.

The journey up the "hill's skull" and the half-mad vigil for "love-cars" represent exactly such an attempt at negating the vital strife of existence. The "Dark Night of the Soul" that the poet nods toward is, appropriately, a metaphor for apophysis, denial, nay-saying, a state of spiritual agnosticism which can lead to spiritual felicity. We might easily imagine the speaker's mission in climbing the hill as one of apophatic contemplation:

I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .

To hold together the twin images of clandestine sex and the correlative "laying" of the dead is to approach a sort of negative enlightenment or emancipation. If sex is a distillation of the social, then the "love-cars" symbolically encapsulate the characters of the first four stanzas, along with their woes and strife. The speaker's quest is to negate them, and perhaps to negate himself as well: there is a trace of self-sacrifice at play in this journey up "the hill's skull," words no doubt chosen to conjure Golgotha, the hilltop site of the Christian crucifixion myth, traditionally called "the place of a skull" in the Christian scriptures.¹²⁹ If subordination to mythos is the postlapsarian state of man and of poetry, the speaker's journey is a redemptive one as well.

¹²⁹ A spurious etymology, but no doubt one that Lowell had in mind.

But Lowell is no Shelley, and the speaker here is distinct from the poet insofar as the latter expects no success in the endeavor. The attentive reader may enjoy a touch of dramatic irony here, knowing that this manic dash toward a spiritual mirage is doomed to failure. Lowell lays it on thick, after all: the combination of the Dark Night and Golgotha is a bit much for a poem inhabited by an heiress, a decorator, and several skunks. Yet there is gravity and truth in the particular mechanism of failure, revealed at the end of stanza 6:

I myself am hell;
nobody's here—

A touch of Milton lurks in these lines, so that the speaker is now Satan, Christ, and St. John of the Cross all at once; we would not be wrong to crack a smile here in the poem's darkest moment. But "I myself am hell" is far more than mere allusion: it is surrender, defeat, and morbid epiphany. With the desperate act of spiritual nullification having failed, the speaker is left with the realization that, like the child in "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," he is "unseen and all-seeing [. . .] Agrippina / in the Golden House of Nero"—mother of mythos, aition of his own autochthonous miseries. We might also read the lines as an inversion of Sartre's well-remembered assertion from *No Exit* (1944), "Hell is other people." In Sartre's philosophy, one central human misery is the perception of oneself as an object; in Lowell's, the problem is the self's even more inexorable position as a subject—as the perpetual and enforced author of the oppressive paradigms of mythos.¹³⁰

But the final line of the stanza, "nobody's here," nudges the poem in a different direction, as we are welcome to read the poem's negation of human presence as inclusive of the speaker himself. "Nobody's here" implies "not even I," which, in the poem's ever-shifting logic of

¹³⁰ A fruitful parallel can be found in the similarly post-Existential panic of the speaker in Elizabeth Bishop's "In the Waiting Room," which also explores perceiving the presence of the self in the outside world rather than, per Sartre, the outside world's perception of the self.

identity, implies that Hell itself may be absent if only the knowing subject can detach itself from its own damning, ensnaring subjectivity. The line masquerades as nihilistic emptiness, but within the context of the poem's complicating frame it in fact offers a glimpse of a possible way out of the discontents that govern the narrative. It also concludes a progression that the reader might notice only in retrospect: as heiress fades into dotage, millionaire fades into elsewhere, and decorator fades into marriage, the poem tries to play the same sleight-of-hand trick on its speaker, offering disappearance as a way out of the shadow of mythos.

But subjectivity, by definition, can never be deliberately annulled, and the poem knows it: what occurs is not an erasure of the self but a transposition of the knowing subject onto its own idea of the perception and experience of the skunks. This is not to say that the poem personifies or anthropomorphizes the skunks, which would be too obvious a failure. Instead, the poem constructs skunks that are wholly dependent both on human environs for their survival and on human discourse for their ontology. The gentrified town skunk is like a sidewalk tree; it signifies a nature to which it does not quite belong. These skunks are not wild beasts visiting from the wilderness, but denizens whose inhumanity is coincidence. The verse itself supports this notion: the comic, nursery-rhyme jangle of "moonlight for a bite" continues to ring in the high front vowels throughout the stanza ("white stripes, moonstruck *eyes*' red fire," etc.), lending a cartoonish quality to the scene. The actions of the skunks, scavengers by nature, are equally undignified: "a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail. / She jabs her wedge-head in a cup / of sour cream [. . .]" The whole scene is playful, of course, and does offer at least a tonal reprieve from the gravity of misery in the "Dark Night" stanzas, but still the reader is forced to confront the fact that the skunks lead a parasitic existence, subsisting on humanity's unpalatable refuse.

The poem makes this point, however, in order to draw our attention to a subtler form of parasitism, one for which the skunks can hardly be blamed: their behavior and character are ultimately subsumed by the poem's human perspective. The final line, "and will not scare," has more than a touch of mock-heroism, and reminds us that the skunks are being tentatively offered as a moral foil to the humans who so easily and predictably surrender to mythos. We may rightly assume that skunks know no mythos, and we may reductively assume that their simple life of subsistence is less woe-ridden than that of speaker or heiress or decorator; this does not mean that they offer the human speaker a way out. In fact, by presenting the skunks' ethos in human terms—"and will not scare"—the poem implicates them in the very struggle that it offered them as a way out of. To suggest that they face adversity boldly is to remain trapped within a milieu whose positions are still defined by that very adversity.

Perhaps the idea of triumph or boldness does at least offer fleeting respite: "I stand on top / of our back steps and breathe the rich air" is a peaceful image, if an impermanent one. But that respite is dependent on imagining the animal itself as subject to human tensions. Ultimately it is an extension of the reach of mythos, not an escape from its influence. Thus in its final poem *Life Studies* neatly encapsulates its essential gesture: that mythos is inexorable, that it is the root of ethos's misery, that the knowing subject is constant witness to the struggles of ethos and mythos, and that our own subjectivity both sustains mythos and entraps us in it. Crucially, the volume does not suggest the possibility of any sort of escape or triumph, but offers itself as an extended meditation on the complicated dynamic between the two: ethos and mythos, subject and world, apostate and church, offspring and ancestry. The volume's conception of mythos is perhaps more varied and nuanced than it is in *Lord Weary's Castle*, where the primary antagonist, as we have

seen, is a sort of threatening existential summation, but the essential gesture of hopelessly embattled ethos remains intact even through the drastic formal changes in Lowell's poetry.

The Genesis and Form of Notebook 1967–68

It is not until the latter half of the tumultuous 1960s, however, that Lowell takes this archetypal struggle between ethos and mythos and puts it into a vessel whose shape even slightly resembles the long form and sustained narrative of the classical epic. The work in question, Notebook 1967–68, does not offer the sort of radical formal departure that we recognize in the free verse of *Life Studies*. We might even read Notebook's terse, sonnet-like lyrics as a gesture of formal conservatism after the innovations of *Life Studies* and the subsequent volume *For the Union Dead*. However, we can also view Notebook's 14-line, unrhymed, irregularly-metered verses as Lowell's attempt to apply his particular brand of mid-20th-century free verse to one of the formal cornerstones of the English poetic tradition, the sonnet. The poet is not reverting to the ease of an imitative tradition; rather, he is reworking the old in the image of the new, attempting to colonizing the past with the inventiveness of the present.¹³¹

Of course this is what innovative poets often do, but it is particularly significant that we see it so clearly at this stage in Lowell's oeuvre. Two decades into his mature career, he had by the mid '60s firmly established the struggle between ethos and mythos as his signature theme. In the volume we are about to turn to, Notebook 1967–68, the poet himself more than ever becomes

¹³¹ The temporal scheme at play even in this stanza form should sound familiar after the capacious and overdetermined presents of "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" and "Skunk Hour." Formally, wholly extradiegetically, the poet acts as ethos in the struggle against the mythos of tradition.

a player in the drama of the poems: the move away from the first-person “Confessionalism” of *Life Studies* and toward the greater detachment of *Notebook*’s history-obsessed lyrics is, in fact, a turn away from the novelistic fictionalization of the self and toward a more essayistic style that invites us to hear the poet himself as the lyric speaker.¹³² Accurately or not, the poems of *Notebook* present themselves as writing, even as a sort of unpolished spontaneity. After all, the volume is called *Notebook*, and its structure claims to follow the real-time act of its composition. It is not a well-constructed and conspicuously illusory simulacrum of reality like the Chekhovian realism of *Life Studies*; gone is the split consciousness of “emotion recollected in tranquility”¹³³ and the evocation of an authentic past self. Though *Notebook* offers fewer declarations about the inner life of a fictive “Robert Lowell,” it offers the more direct illusion of writer-as-speaker, thus positioning the poet himself, or at least his extradiegetic double, as the locus of embattled ethos, or even as epic hero.

¹³² It is worth noting that some of *Notebook*’s harsher critics focus so myopically on its juxtapositional and kaleidoscopic form that they miss this element of continuity entirely. David Bromwich speaks for many of the book’s contemporaries when he writes, “*Notebook* marks a point of departure for Robert Lowell—the declaration of a new form, therefore a new content—just as significant as his earlier shift in *Life Studies*. The difference, of course, is that *Notebook* is not likely to affect the mainstream of poetry, because the style it invents is bad—really, because it is not in any accepted sense a style, but rather the flow of an unremittingly turbid subconscious.” (“*Notebook*,” *Commentary*, vol. 52, no. 2 (1971), in *Modern Critical Views: Robert Lowell*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 35.) If one assumes “a new content,” then indeed the volume’s mechanics are difficult to justify; if one acknowledges the fundamental continuity of the struggle between ethos and mythos from Lowell’s earlier work, however, then the novelty of style shows itself for what it is—a new vessel for an old fluid.

¹³³ Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*. In *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1802* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 111.

Furthermore, a crucial shift in subjectivity occurs between *Life Studies* and *Notebook* 1967–68. Although Lowell’s “Confessional” tone and subject matter in *Life Studies* seemed radical, even shocking, in the context of early- and mid-twentieth-century poetry, the speaking voice in many of the poems resembles the omniscient surrogate of the 19th-century novelist: keenly observant, objective, removed, always perfectly accurate, maintaining a sort of Tolstoyan poise even in the face of death and madness.¹³⁴ The speaker in *Notebook* 1967–68, on the other hand, is something of a mad prophet, ordering the world into jarring and incongruous images. There is more poesis in these poems than in any Lowell had previously attempted. The classic phase of realist fiction—one might do worse than to think of Tolstoy—rests on the assumption that character is both in the grip of history and also incapable of understanding fully its own position. The speaking voice in *Notebook* 1967–68—which is no doubt a surrogate-authorial voice—constantly pushes back against history, shaping, re-shaping, re-making, and making it according to the whims of his own autonomous poesis.

The theoretical repercussions of this peculiar alignment of author and speaker, knowing subject and poetic maker, are a profound and somewhat unexpected recasting of another interpretation of the essential gesture of epic, as envisioned by Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The authors of that influential work start from the premise that the great Homeric epics are a sort of patchwork retelling of older myths, with the narrative of the epic itself acting as the sutures that hold the whole together. According to the terms we have been using, mythos acts as the underlying foundation to the story as a whole, with ethos providing the dynamic particularities that serve as the binding agent. One might think of Odysseus as the glue that binds Cyclops to Circe, both of which predate Homer, and both of

¹³⁴ “Skunk Hour” is something of an exception here, though perhaps only in its fifth and sixth stanzas, largely due to the speaking voice briefly inhabiting the plane of action.

which offer the hero, ethos, vital adversity in exchange for his centripetal pull toward a narrative center.

However, these myths do not come through this transformation unchanged. Something of their poetic essence, their godhead, their world-building permanence, their evocative energy, is irretrievably lost as they become cemented in the static, already-having-been-made matrix of the written and conspicuously literary genre of epic. To make a clumsy analogy, this effect, both in classical epic and in Notebook 1967–68, is something like that of a museum on a collection of ritual artifacts—their new, artificial context binds and preserves them while simultaneously sapping them of their original efficacy, ensuring them a long, if somewhat insipid, afterlife.¹³⁵

If we step back from the narrative level of the text, we can see that the author of such a collage may enjoy a sort of triumph over mythos even as his written hero remains embattled within it. Homer has conquered mythos (in a sense) even as it threatens Odysseus at every turn. When we apply this logic to Lowell's Notebook 1967–68, we catalyze a strange and crucial transformation: Lowell the poet, master over mythos, and Lowell the lyric speaker, combatant and subordinate to mythos, merge. Though still embattled, ethos itself gains a sort of writerly mastery over mythos.¹³⁶ We can view this dynamic as an extension or extrapolation of the Agrippina trope from *Life Studies*, the idea of the mythos-mothering psyche. In Notebook,

¹³⁵ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 35-40.

¹³⁶ A counterpoint to my own view here of the author-figure as epic hero is offered by Stephen James: "By making his own psychopathology part of the subject of his poetry, [Lowell] invites speculation about the latent authoritarian inside any author." Possibly—though these terms better fit a Poundian maker, striving to make the world itself a character in its own drama, than a Lowell or a Homer attempting to tame myth (successfully or unsuccessfully) into an egalitarian counterpoint to ethos. (*Shades of Authority: The Poetry of Lowell, Hill and Heaney* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 45.)

Agrippina takes charge of her belligerent offspring, if not quelling him than at least corralling him. Nero, mythos, the history, politics, and culture of the strained and aged American Republic, is forced beneath the domineering voice of Lowell the rhapsode, creator and singer of the epic. Yet as we will see, the struggle is by no means resolved, as the sheer force of the speaking voice constantly betrays the ferocity of the interior struggle with a world which, though penned in by the strictures of the 14-line stanza and the rigid truth of chronology, still manages perpetually to out-Herod Herod.

There is, however, a sense of weariness in these poems that one cannot detect either in the spiritual bellicosity of *Lord Weary's Castle* nor in the heroic defeatism of *Life Studies*: Notebook 1967–68 is rife with passages that sing the erotic exhaustion of fraught marriage, disimpassioned infidelity, and late middle-age. One might ask whether these sections, less “confessional” than auto-analytic, have anything more to do with the struggle between ethos and mythos than, say, the decidedly un-epic lyric forms in which Wallace Stevens so perfectly mourned his own erotic impoverishment. The key here is, as perhaps always, is context. Consider the beginning of the first poem from the sequence “Mexico”:

The difficulties, the impossibilities,
stand out: I, fifty, humbled with the years' gold garbage,
dead laurel grizzling my back like spines of hay;
you, some sweet, uncertain age, say twenty-seven,
unballasted by honor or deception.
What help then? . . .

(NB678, 58-63)

Everything about these lines indicates an exhaustion of the spirit, from the pseudo-baroque diction of “the years' gold garbage,” to the sense-disorienting verbs “grizzling” and “unballasted,” even to the offhanded and passionless diction of “say twenty-seven.” True, the backdrop is itself dismal, exhausting: the sun, the “high fever,” the “wayfarer's predestined

diarrhea” all speak of external circumstances, though hardly mythological ones. The poem does give us a glimpse of mythos in the dark commend “Hope not in God here, nor the Aztec gods,” but it is a vague mythos, distant if not absent. The lyric by itself seems more autonomously personal than most of Life Studies, and the attentive reader may wonder whether Lowell is not in fact drifting away from his earlier, defining fascination with the structural struggle of epic. Against this I would offer two counterpoints: first, that the inclusion of these lyrics of personal and interpersonal autonomy is itself a gesture, on the level of the volume as a whole, of the author feigning resistance to the otherwise oppressively present forces of mythos; and second, that the bleak and hopeless tone of the personal, here and elsewhere, may be read as evidence of this gesture’s futility, as we can easily read the human players’ vital impoverishment as a symptom of the diseased hostility of contemporary and historical mythos that the volume explores elsewhere.¹³⁷ For the mythic realm of the entire volume is itself impoverished, though no less threatening as a result. America is an aged and tumultuous state (“The Races”), the witless young walk the halls of power (“Harvard”), and actual Napoleons are reduced to their two-bit simulacra (“Power”).

Before we turn to the poems, it is worth noting that Lowell’s own comments on the genre and genesis of Notebook 1967–68 suggest that he himself conceived of the work as a sort of epic.

In June of 1967, he writes to Elizabeth Bishop: “No news. I’m drained of anything to write. Not

¹³⁷ Perhaps the persistent myth of Robert Lowell as a “Confessional” poet stems in part from the subsequent division by topic of Notebook’s poems. When wrenched away from the material that became History, the remaining lyrics as collected in *For Lizzie and Harriet* do seem more exclusively self-referential and less productively fictitious, an impression no doubt furthered by Lowell’s subsequent (& notorious) inclusion of personal letters in *The Dolphin*. Nevertheless, I believe the circumstances of production to be more important than later revisionist decision, and it is therefore important to note that the more “personal” parts of Notebook 1967–68 were generated within a framework of epic tension.

a poem for a year and a half. I wish I had a suitcase of unfinished possibilities. (I've just [looked] at Eliot's juvenilia. Some of the best lines in the Waste Land come from an early quite hopeless lyric on Saint some one.[])"¹³⁸ Already, with the Notebook poems not even begun, Lowell seems to be contemplating or at least longing for a larger project as a way out of a creative blight. Interestingly, in the same letter he mentions the recent Six-Day War in the Middle East: "Did the late war scare you to death? It did me while it was simmering."¹³⁹ Between this and the reference to *The Waste Land*, we might also infer that Lowell's usual fear of the trans-human forces of history is as present as ever.

Lowell first speaks of having broken through his writer's block in a letter to Adrienne Rich in August 1967: "I've been poeticizing (hideous word . . .) furiously, and now have three poems, all memento moris about summer and being fifty. One, long, about a hundred lines, takes phrases and more from Simone Weil . . ."¹⁴⁰ The form of Notebook 1967–68 has not yet emerged, but we catch a glimpse of its eventual scope in the reference to the 100-line poem. By winter of the same year, the proportions grew greater still. Lowell writes to Mary McCarthy in December: "My summer's poem is now 800 lines, practically an *Iliad* for my short-winded symbolist talent. It has what you name, all my usual stuff, plus Napoleon, Cato, the Duc de Guise etc. Things seem to swim out of the happenings of the day, including distant things, the ponderings and vagaries of thought."¹⁴¹ Here are most of the aspects of what the work would

¹³⁸ Robert Lowell, *The Letters of Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 486.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 485.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 489.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 492.

eventually become. As its unique poetic aspects begin to emerge out of a deliberate engagement with history, its own version of history begins to emerge out of its unique poetic aspects. The relationship between form and content is recursive, just as the poet/speaker shapes mythos as mythos shapes the world of the poet/speaker. The reference here to the *Iliad*, though at least half sarcastic, should not be dismissed casually. In fact, its coupling with the self-deprecation of “my short-winded symbolist talent” suggests that Lowell is apologizing to himself for a project he has already decided to undertake, one whose intrinsic brokenness predestines it to a sort of glorious failure.

When Lowell finally mentions the final form of the work to Ted Hughes at Christmas, he compares himself to Robert Browning, the last great poet of pre-Poundian epic ethos: “I am buried in a long poem, a sort of notebook or journal in 14 line unrhymed sections. It’s now reached about 850 lines; a Ring and the Book among my short-winded works.”¹⁴² The reference to Browning’s work may well reveal an intention on Lowell’s part to follow Berryman’s lead in reintroducing a powerful element of ethos into a genre—or rather the afterlife of a genre—that spent most of the 20th century in the disproportionate and overbearing hands of mythos. This is not to say that Notebook 1967–68 is an anti-Pound polemic any more than the Dream Songs was, but Lowell, having journeyed already from *Lord Weary’s Castle* through Life Studies, was well aware at this stage that his own poetics required a strong and centrally present element of ethos as a foil to mythos, even if that ethos is doomed from the start.

One final note on the genre of the work: among the letters I’ve quoted above, the word “sonnet” is conspicuously absent. Even in the “Afterthought” to Notebook, written in winter of 1969, Lowell concedes the affinity of his 14-line units with the sonnet only peripherally, perhaps

¹⁴² Ibid., 493.

even begrudgingly: “My meter, fourteen line unrhymed blank verse sections, is fairly strict at first and elsewhere, but often corrupts in single lines to the freedom of prose. Even with this license, I fear I have failed to avoid the themes and gigantism of the sonnet.” The word “sections” is crucial here, as it emphasizes Lowell’s desire to have the work read as a coherent whole.¹⁴³ Moreover, the poet is going out of his way to encourage us not to read his poem as a sonnet sequence, with all the cultural baggage of Shakespeare and Sydney dragging his theme away from the sublime dread of the individual confronting history, toward the easy conventions of poetic immortality, frustrated love, and so forth—that is, the uncomplicated transcendence of history by a poetic voice that declares itself and its experience to be either above or outside it, an artificial separation of subject and circumstance that is deeply antithetical to Lowell’s poetic agenda both in Notebook 1967–68 and elsewhere.

Nowhere is the entanglement of subject and history, ethos and mythos, more apparent than in the sequence “The Races,” which directly confronts the chaos, disorder, and disillusionment of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. To the speaker and to the poet, the convention straddles the line between personal experience and public event. This marks a crucial change from the dynamics of the poems we’ve examined so far: before Notebook

¹⁴³ The irony here is that Lowell himself hardly treated it as such, eventually splitting up and expanding Notebook 1967–68 into the somewhat more coherent and yet (but therefore?) less poignant volumes *History* and *For Lizzie and Harriet*. (For better or for worse, the 2003 publication of Lowell’s *Collected Poems* has canonized this arrangement.) However, it would be the height of folly to let the eventual fate of these works detract from our conception of Notebook 1967–68 as a coherent, complete, and self-contained work. Lowell was a notorious revisionist throughout his career, and even included the following note of apology in the expanded 1970 edition of Notebook: “I am loath to display a litter of variants, and hold up a still target for the critic who knows that most second thoughts, when visible, are worse thoughts. I am sorry to ask anyone to buy this poem twice. I couldn’t stop writing, and have handled my published book as if it were manuscript.” (Robert Lowell, *Notebook* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), 264.)

1967–68, Lowell’s poetics is more concerned with discovering and explicating the enormous weight of history and mythos lurking behind seemingly inconsequential moments of the present, as in the long slog of the oxen in “The Holy Innocents” or the exteriorly ordinary moment of childhood leisure in “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow.”

In the poems of “The Races,” on the other hand, poet and speaker are both acutely aware of the monumental significance of the present moment. Seeing becomes more important than evocation; the prophet is exchanged for the witness. Yet at the same time some principle of experiential conservation counterbalances the shift toward immediate experience with logically disjunctive images and axioms that form the patina of surrealism that Lowell speaks of in the volume’s “Afterthought.” This disorienting stratum prevents “The Races” from reading as an eyewitness account of historical circumstances; rather, the sequence sustains the illusion (or truth) that it is a made thing, a product of poesis, as though the poet’s voice were struggling to conspicuously mark its made nature against the threatening reality of its subject matter, employing the signs of making as an antidote to the threat that truth poses to fiction.¹⁴⁴

The first poem in the sequence, “August,” serves as a prelude to the disorder that would engulf the DNC by the end of the month. The poem wraps itself in the acute inevitability of what is to come, leaning on the tension of the past and the present in order to foreshadow the future.

Though dated “August 7, 1968,” weeks before the chaos of the Democratic National Convention

¹⁴⁴ On a similar note, Nick Halpern suggests the following: “It is unclear, though, how deeply Lowell, as a poet, cares about the political. While Adrienne Rich instinctively makes the personal political, Lowell instinctively makes the political personal. This can make for some surprises . . . Everything is personal for Lowell now.” That is to say, more or less, that everything in the world of *Notebook* is a thing over which ethos strives to hold some mastery, even if the poet/maker’s voice knows full well how futile an effort this ultimately is. (*Everyday and Prophetic: The Poetry of Lowell, Ammons, Merrill, and Rich* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 89.)

erupted in Chicago, “August” exists in a sort of double timeframe in which “the great Convention” both has and has not occurred. The Convention itself lies in line 5, at the heart of the poem’s octave:

Brotherly, stacked and mean, the great Convention
throws out its Americana like dead flowers:
choices, at best, that cannot hurt, or cure;
many are chosen, and so few are called. . . .

(NB678, 136)

The mixed temporality and ambiguous aspect of these lines are typical of Lowell’s style in Notebook 1967–68: by stripping away qualifying and clarifying context, Lowell extracts startling ranges of signification from phrases as simple as “throws out.” Apparently idiomatic and incidental, the significance of this verb phrase deepens the more we try to make sense of it. The act described could be one of discarding—after all, this is perfectly congruous with the following image of “dead flowers”—yet the late-in-time act of discarding does not quite fit with the temporality of a Convention that has not yet occurred. The other possible meaning is more oblique: this could be “throwing out” in the sense of “tossing forth,” as befits ideas and fishing nets, the latter of which would be congruous with the description of those summoned forth by the Convention: “choices, at best, that cannot hurt, or cure.” These possibilities overlap slightly in the idea of delegates and candidates first being summoned, then being discarded, though this synthesis puts enormous weight on what itself is a throwaway turn of phrase, “throws out.” The edifice is mighty, the foundation weak. Mythos, after all, in spite of its power to domineer and slay, rests on nothing but cultural knowledge, participation, and consent. It is as airy as the Republic itself with its authority immured in the chaos of 1968.

Yet “August” couches its prophesied refuse in an almost hallucinatory aesthetics, a symbolism robbed of its referents that is at once a comfortingly real portrait of a late-summer landscape and also a surreal dream-vision of decaying artifice. The poem begins:

This night the mustard bush and goldenrod
and more unlikely yellows tread a spiral,
blue china snakes, blue ribbons—cool not cold,
the vase eviscerated down to ribbon. . . .

Conspicuous artificiality negates the purity of nature; porcelain frailty negates the stately pomp of blue and gold; “cool not cold” negates even the terror we might feel at these transformations and appropriations. The effect is one of overwhelming disorientation, the thorough dissolution of reference points in anticipation of the grammatical and temporal ambiguities that govern the following lines about the Convention. Moreover, the object summoned, “the vase eviscerated down to ribbon,” serves to contain the refuse or bait, the “dead flowers” of the Convention. All the world, the visionary pastoralism of “this night,” gathers to form a broken vase to hold the tools of a single great abstraction which is of paramount importance to history and to the nation. Mythos is groundless, emergent, protean and unassailable. As the poem says near its conclusion:

The future is only standing on our feet,
and what can be is only what will be—

These brilliantly non-polarized copulas answer none of our questions (who is doing the standing—we or the future?—and is possibility predicated on existence, or vice versa?), and the four terms they join in pairs are vague enough to flirt with tautology without quite committing it. In any case, the future, as history and the Republic, is reduced to the footnote to an aesthetic vision while at the same time rising to subsume that vision in the poem’s middle lines. “August” serves as a microcosm of Notebook 1967–68’s overarching gesture, forcing mythos, penned yet untamed, into the confines of conspicuous artifice.

The fourth poem in the sequence, “Fear in Chicago,” employs a simple structure in which the details of scenery and history overwhelm the speaker, who reasserts his agency only at the end through a wrenching shift in perspective, from Old World stateliness to the plastic paranoia of popular culture. Crucially, mythos is not a hidden or even a particularly menacing presence in the poem’s first 12 lines: the “little millionaire’s place” where everything is “freshly French” exists as a conspicuous and calculatedly unapologetic symbol of power, money, history, and high culture transubstantiated into the accident of decor. Yet there is a sense that the dwelling is trying a little too hard to announce its allegiance with mythos: the incongruity of the “blank white and medallion-little bust / of Franz Schubert” and the “blown-up colored photograph / of the owner’s wife, executive-Bronzino” is bridged and judged by the subsequent exclamation, “this frantic touch of effort!” Beneath the stately lies the frantic—the allegiance with mythos is made out of fear, and the invitation of mythos into the domestic sphere is a vain attempt at appeasement. The “little millionaire” becomes an important figure in the sequence, unseen though he is: his attempt to exert mastery over symbols of power is motivated by his limited and inextricable position as its servant. The irony here is similar to that which drives the opening stanzas of “Skunk Hour,” whose figures tried in vain to escape the pull of mythos. Of course, the “little millionaire” here has more in common with the poet Lowell than the Maine coast’s summer escapees: his attempt to cope with the weight of mythos is to order its trappings, to attempt to craft them into an arrangement that is his possession rather than his master.

The contrast and compliment to this gesture is the “little girl’s bedroom” of the poem’s final two lines. Here is one of those moments where Lowell stumbles into “the gigantism of the sonnet,” or wants us to think he has; there is an almost Shakespearean finality about this closing couplet:

except the little girl's bedroom, perfect with posters:
"Do not enter," and "Sock it to me, Baby."

(NB678, 137)

Of course the millionaire's daughter is just as embroiled in mythos as he is: her slogans are mass-market, mass-produced, endlessly iterated catch phrases of youth culture. But there is an honesty in the girl's subservience to mythos that is lacking in the grown man's "frantic touch of effort"—her fear, unlike his, is one that can say to the world "Do not enter" while caring not at all that the worlds are not her own, that the sentiment is exaggerated, that she is playing at fear. Comfortable with her rebellion rather than protective of her institutions, she becomes the heaving mob of riotous protestors surrounding the DNC, too confident in their demanded future to fret about authenticity or aura. She is a consumer of ideology while her father, new money in Old World garb, is a nervous guardian of the establishment and the order that his daughter's generation is hastily revealing as arbitrary and ineffectual. After all, the city itself lays siege to the perfect order of his lower-upper-class home:

Or out-window,
two cunning cylinder skyscraper apartment buildings,
six circles of car garages below the homes,
moored boats below the cars—more Louis Quinze
and right than anything in this apartment;

That is to say: outside is Hell—Dante's Hell of seven circles—which is still more perfect and right than a French score and a bust of Schubert. Outside is honest confrontation, the disillusioned realm of tectonics, skyscrapers and car garages, but also the realm of disillusioned masses facing mythos and teargas face-to-face. To say that the little girl's bedroom is even more right is to make her the unlikely avatar both of the protestors and of the poet himself, a temporary and ad hoc epic hero who not only refrains from denying the power of mythos but addresses it directly with a bold negative imperative. Yet in a typical gesture of self-defeating

balance, Lowell lets this “Do not enter” subtly transform the door to the girl’s bedroom into the gates of Hell, if we allow the words to sound as a modern, amoral simplification of Dante’s “Abandon all hope, ye who enter.” Hell goes both ways—the tide rises and falls—all things come about in accordance with strife, and the struggle between mythos and ethos takes on a more Heraclitean guise than in previous volumes of Lowell’s work.¹⁴⁵

In a similar vein, poem 6 of the sequence, “After the Convention,” begins in bitter naturalism:

Life, hope, they conquer death, generally, always;
and if the steamroller goes over the flower, the flower dies.

(NB678, 138)

The philosophical and poetic difficulties of Lowell’s late verse, from Notebook onward, may, perhaps, be summarized in the single word “and” that joins these lines. It is not a disingenuous conjunction: the poet is attempting to confront a world in which both of these statements are entirely and eternally true. Life is invincible, is fragile; hope sustains, enervates; Hell is on both sides of a closed door. In the harsh light of this anti-fiction, poetry wilts:

After five nights of Chicago: police and mob,
I am so tired and had, clichés are wisdom,
the clichés of paranoia. . . .

“Do not enter” is not a translation or even a transubstantiation of Dante, but an evisceration: hope already abandoned, the moral choice absent, uncomplicated, the fate of the soul predestined and uninteresting. “Do not enter” is a sentiment Dante never would have voiced: it lacks life;

¹⁴⁵ “Fear in Chicago” also exemplifies the voyeuristic qualities of the Notebook speaker, discussed at length in a recent article by Phillip Beard (“The Spy, the Shark’s Eye, and the ‘True Unreal’ of Lowell’s Notebook,” *Literary Imagination*, vol. 16 no. 1 (March 2014), 1-18). The passive voyeur within the poem provides an interesting counterpoint to the shaping and controlling tendencies of the poetic voice that I am discussing here.

without intimations of the stars above, the stelle on which Dante ends all three books of the *Commedia*, even Hell lacks meaning. In these lines from “After the convention,” the poet-voice stands not within a meaningful struggle, but apart from a meaningless one. The static, lifeless opposition of protesters and policemen is reified and positioned as one pole of a far graver struggle between the vital, fictive energy of poesis and the lifeless, ineffectual congelation of paranoia, politics, ingenuousness, chicanery, youth culture, and liberal messianism, all embodied here in the image of the exhausted poet dispassionately confronting cliché. Cliché is the new American mythos, emerging from the play of interchangeable belligerents and threatening poetry itself by encroaching on the territory of language. The role of ethos, the poet, is to carry on in spite of but also to subsume this annihilating construct. For Homer, of course, it was enough to subsume mythos by pitting it against an equally diegetic ethos—mythos threatened the heroes, not the poet and certainly not poetry itself. For Lowell in Notebook 1967–1968, the stakes are incalculably higher, both because the ethos of poet and hero have merged and also because mythos threatens the vitality and longevity of the medium itself.

This thoroughly embattled present state also helps illuminate Lowell’s mid-career obsession with history: the present is in part the summation of the past, and the founding myths of the Western past are therefore equally formidable adversaries in need of taming by poesis. In the sequence “Power,” a nervous streak underlies the apparent rhetorical flippancy of twelve sorties against the idea of historical imperiousness. The poems succeed in violently humbling their subjects, but in doing so they betray the otherwise concealed conviction that their subjects, even at a remove of centuries, are dangerous enough to need humbling. The dead are the only undefeated, and discourse alone can keep them at bay; the poetic act of acknowledging their near-omnipotence is the only instrument capable of diverting their collective power-as-mythos,

both through direct attacks of rhetoric and through indirect subsumption into the epic texture of Notebook as a whole. “[I]t’s better to have lived, than live,” shouts Richard III in the last line of “Bosworth Field,” but the Dantean trick of textual reanimation denies the dead the safety of the grave—Notebook exhumes the past in order to slay it, and “Power” subjects its historical agonists to the debilitating mythic and syntagmatic forces of which they otherwise might be a component. “Attila” confronts the essential barbarity of the twentieth century through a feint toward antiquity. Hitler, the embodiment of the poem’s true discursive subject, occupies only the first three lines:

Hitler had fingertips of apprehension,
“Who knows how long I’ll live? Let us have the war.
We are the barbarians, the world is near the end.”
(NB678, 96)

The petulant solipsism of these lines is itself a satisfying jab against modernity’s greatest villain, but the true bellicose energy of the poem comes from its immediate and narratologically permanent leap back to the precedent of fifth-century Hun leader Attila, whom the poem presents as pure id to foil Hitler’s overwhelming ego: “this sedentary nomad, the ‘He who has, has’.” Attila is defined by the equation of being and possession, as though his self were not a discrete abstraction but the sum of his conquests. The death-drive of Hitler is subsumed by Attila’s unselfconscious naivety; the illusion of power is neatly unmasked in the asocial urges of the almost animalistic Hun:

Attila mounted on raw meat and greens
galloped to massacre in his single fieldmouse suit,
he never entered a house that wasn’t burning,
could only sleep on horseback, sinking deep
in his rural dream. . . .

It is a short leap from “rural dreams” to the Romantic idyll in which English poetry permitted itself to languish until the era of Modernism. There is a touch of poetic nostalgia here both in the

matter and in execution—"sinking deep in his rural dream" could almost be a quotation from Hart Crane in one of his less abstruse moods—but most importantly, the lines capture a sort of vitality that the poem manages almost to celebrate in spite of its dark opening. The contrast with "We are the barbarians" is immediate, apparent, bitter: the Hitler of the poem, entirely a product of desiccated modernity, has nothing of Attila's vital juice. The crucial difference, however, lies outside the historical realm of the poem's imagined Attila, in the tenuous and ill-defined interstice between that imagined past and the poet/speaker's own modernity:

. . . Would he have found himself
in this coarsest, cruelest, least magnanimous,
most systematic, most philosophical . . .

The reader is left to imagine exactly what noun all these adjectives refer to. The vague possibility exists that they modify "he," Attila, though in that case we are left equally unmoored with respect to "this." Something is certainly missing from these words, lurking in the darkness after the ellipsis. Given the preceding contrast between Attila and Hitler, the reader is invited to assume that the missing noun is something like "age" or "era." The lines attempt to imagine Attila's wild, destructive innocence in the fallen condition of modernity only to find that they cannot even pose the question, let alone answer it. For the struggle that these lines attempt to imagine is the epic struggle in its purist form: Attila, pure ethos, against a backdrop of mythos, the distilled character of the age itself.

Only it is the wrong age, of course—Lowell's, Hitler's, the reader's—and Attila cannot survive the transition from figure-of-mythic-backdrop-with-respect-to-modernity to ethical-subject-pitched-against-modernity. The images of refuse that close the poem are the logical end-product of this transition:

who wondered why the ancient world collapsed,
then also left his festering fume of refuse,

old tins, dead vermin, ashes, eggshells, youth?

The “refuse” left behind by Attila is commensurate with what he himself becomes when dragged into the wrong era: inefficacious abjection.¹⁴⁶ Yet the fact that Attila is also the source of this literal refuse reminds the reader of Attila’s more efficacious position in the past, which the poem and its speaking voice ultimately find themselves unable to erase. The living Attila perseveres as his own echo, and we are reminded of the disturbing permeability of the boundary between mythos and ethos when considered diachronically. This was a concealed theme in the Life Studies era, as characters like Uncle Devereax Winslow skirted the line between an ethical existence with respect to the diegetic present and a mythical existence both with respect to the implied future of lyric recollection and through association with the familial and social history. In the “Power” sequence of *Notebook*, and in Lowell’s late-career history-obsessed lyrics general, it becomes an elaborate mechanism through which the poem transforms the archetypal epic struggle between ethos and mythos.¹⁴⁷

More important still is the fact that the catalyst for all these uncomfortable transformations is the twentieth century itself, present both as the hypothetical site of Attila’s debilitating exile and also through the haunting avatar of Hitler in the first three lines. The

¹⁴⁶ As Vereen Bell points out in *Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), refuse is a common theme, even a defining one, in the volume: “Debris piles up in *Notebook*, burying or snagging and unraveling both private and community dreams of the reasonable and ordered life . . .” (p. 126).

¹⁴⁷ Frances Ferguson comments on the peculiar historical temporality of the volume in “Appointments with Time”: *Robert Lowell’s Poetry through the Notebooks*: “But one finishes [*Notebook* 1967–68] with a sense of the triviality of historical time and a Satanist’s question—Can there be an eternity which is not in love with the productions of time?” The paradox that Frances outlines is very much in keeping with the somewhat recursive play between the totality of mythos and its constituents that I describe here. (*American Poetry Since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives*, ed. Robert B. Shaw (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1973), in *Modern Critical Views: Robert Lowell*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 72.

“fingertips of apprehension” that begin the poem are both a disruptive and an impotent presence, an ineffectual feint toward agency that places even Hitler in a subordinate position with respect to the unnamed, syntagmatic, and inexorable force of history-as-mythos. Neither of the poem’s two “barbarians” can live their “rural dream”—of animalism or of thanatos—against the backdrop of the poet’s own time. In the final reckoning, all the poem’s productive transformations amount only to the creation of a more complex antagonist for mythos to overwhelm. The conspicuous ordering of all of these elements by the omnipresent voice of the poet-figure himself lends ethos a touch of weight as it exerts a writerly mastery over mythos, but the thorough subjugation of all other ethical figures by the forces of mythos is a starkly ironic reminder of the ultimate futility even of the poet’s own project of taming history by shaping it: the detritus of the past may be malleable, mutable, pliable, but the essential syntagmatic threat of mythos in its purist form remains unaltered in the long and complicated march from the world-harrying IS of *Lord Weary’s Castle*, through the ancestral and social nightmares of Life Studies, up to the patchwork myth-juggling of Notebook 1967–68. Though the poet’s style changes like a face in a mirror, the surface of the mirror itself—the inescapable and necessary foundation of historical and syntagmatic awareness without which the poetic act cannot occur, or, in a word, mythos—remains unchanged. Whether Lowell wears the mask of prophet, victim, warrior, or sage, he proceeds from a state of perpetual defeat against an enemy of his own self-aware creation, the Nero to his doomed Agrippina. In Lowell’s oeuvre, then, ethos reemerges from its Poundian exodus only to sing of its own subjugation and to pantomime its always already doomed insurrection.

Chapter 4: Adrienne Rich's Post-Epic Vision

Before turning to Adrienne Rich and her complicated relationship to mythos in a post-epic poetic milieu, let's pause to consider the story so far.

A very long time ago there was a thing called epic. The Greeks did it; their anxious heirs the Romans did it; various European nations did it long after the Pax Romana went up in flames as provinces began their long shuffle toward the awkward arrangement of industrial, capitalist nation-states that themselves went up in flames in the first half of the 20th century. Though it might go without saying, it is important to remember that this is not a story about the world; this is a story about one small continent, Europe, and its unpredictably far-flung influence. American epic is just European epic dislocated, a literature even more anxious about its forbearers than Virgil was about Homer. American epic is not the literature of the Wampanoag, the Lakota, or the Navajo, just as post-classical European epic was not the literature of the Sami, the Komi, or the Almohad Caliphate. Moreover, the story of epic is not a story about humanity; it is specifically a story about systemically empowered, culturally sanctioned, ruling-class, mostly-male humanity—as narrow a sector of the population in the past as it is today.

All of this is to say that traditional epic, and to some extent its twentieth-century offshoots, attempts to create the same space that it attempts to inhabit, poetically reinforcing the power structures that lead to its own exclusive relevance. The mechanism by which that space is created was and is exclusion, sometimes violent exclusion. Troy must burn. Dido must burn. The land must be cleared. The world must be peopled. The generative force of epic, the “tale of the tribe,” stems from its power to destroy.

Like any juggernaut, its sheer mass and inertia should not be underestimated. It has shaped the thought of nations and eras. It has maintained its relevance for millennia because it is

what we read, and we read it because it has maintained its relevance. This is not necessarily a problem; we read what we have, we have what was read, and we cannot ask our ancestors (or someone's) to alter their predilections to suit our desire for a broader picture of the human condition. Nor should we necessarily smash the idols: the greatness of Homer does not rest entirely upon the fact that we haven't stopped reading him. If there is such a thing as great literature, then these works of vast scope, esthetic nuance, incantatory magic, and verbal brilliance fit the bill. But to still our iconoclast's hammer is not to prostrate ourselves. We can choose not to smash while we also choose not to worship. The structures of the past can become like artifacts in a museum, consigned to a separate space that preserves them while depriving them of the power that derived from their structural context.

To make this happen is more difficult than it may sound. We are eternally tempted toward narratives that normalize and reify the idea of civilization (which is, after all, exactly what traditional epic, "the tale of the tribe," does). "Civilization," we too often say, rose from the wilds outside of Athens and was morbidly wounded at the Somme. Epic is the battle cry of civilization; epic is a phoenix that will rise again even in a world that may not know how to sustain it. In poetry governed at least in part by this sort of almost unavoidable thinking, we have seen Berryman forge a sort of resurrected epic, with the nation of the pathologized human soul replacing the state or the tribe. We have seen Lowell forging a post-epic lyrical poetics that looks out upon the world of epic, particularly the world of mythos, with fear and trembling. What we have not seen is a poet who conspicuously engages with the heritage of epic with the express purpose of wrenching poetry and human experience free from the oppression of mythos, of the idea of ethos defined solely against the backdrop of mythos, and of the hefty cultural inertia and morbid limitations of epic storytelling.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that Adrienne Rich is exactly such a poet, and that her body of work consistently engages with a poetic and social mission to disentangle human culture not merely from the bonds of mythos but from the entire kyriarchal apparatus of the epic tradition, which in Rich's world first and foremost serves an extraliterary social function as an enabling and perpetuating agent of power.¹⁴⁸ The crucial difference between Rich and the post-war poets we have looked at so far is that Rich not only recognizes the threats posed by the cultural overvaluation of mythos, but also offers a way out from them. In this way she differs from Berryman, who is concerned with the revitalization of ethos within the remnants of the epic framework; and she differs even more drastically from Lowell, whose carefully constructed performances of sociopolitical paralysis concern themselves with preaching the threatening nature of mythos at the expense of ever offering more than a glimpse of a world beyond its reach. Whereas Berryman is a radically personal idealist and Lowell is an apocalyptic descriptivist, Rich—at least the Rich of the Sixties and Seventies—is a revolutionary pragmatist, concerned not only with creating nullifying spaces to confine and disempower mythos within her own poems, but also with the profound real-world stakes of this otherwise poetic and literary gesture.

This chapter will focus closely on three poems by Adrienne Rich: "Abnegation" from *Leaflets* (1969), "Storm Warnings" from *A Change of World* (1951), and "Diving into the

¹⁴⁸ In different terms, this is similar to what Wendy Martin calls "a theme which has been central to [Rich's] recent poetry—the necessity for women to free themselves from the cultural constructs which mediate their experience in order to determine for themselves the meaning of their lives." (Wendy Martin, "A Nurturing Ethos in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich," in *Reading Adrienne Rich*, ed. Jane Roberta Cooper (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 164-5.) To say that Rich's vision pertains to the liberation of human ethos from power and mythos generally is not to deny that it pertains to the liberation of female ethos from male power and mythos specifically; the "cultural constructs" that Martin speaks of are mythos by any other name, especially when encountered in the context of poetry.

Wreck” from *Diving into the Wreck* (1973). I have chosen these poems because each one offers a unique structural way of confining and disempowering mythos, and each aligns itself with histories of epic, myth, and power in a way that distinguishes them not only from one another but also from the poets we have examined earlier in this dissertation. However, these poems also share something fundamental: each one constructs a conceptual space that allows the speaker to disengage from the traditionally closed systems of mythos and power, thus gesturing toward a post-epic poetics while also offering a pragmatic, experiential paradigm that might be applied to the social and political world outside of the poem. Finally, these three poems span over twenty years of Rich’s early career. “Storm Warnings” comes from her first volume, often dismissed by critics and the poet herself as juvenile and derivative¹⁴⁹, while “Diving into the Wreck” dates from the full fruition of Rich’s individual voice and political awareness in the mid 1970s.

Through this historical breadth, I hope to demonstrate that Rich’s unique post-epic perspective

¹⁴⁹ Judith McDaniel’s comment on “Storm Warnings” is as good an example of this tendency as any: “While apparently accepting the traditional female roles in early life, nonetheless feelings of strain and stifled emotion characterize Adrienne Rich’s first two volumes.” This “nonetheless” is the perfect synecdoche for the tendency of critics to see Rich’s early work as containing a modicum of worth in spite of itself rather than focusing on its particular (though admittedly understated) strengths, traits, and insights. Interestingly, even those critics who insist on the lightness of Rich’s early verse do not afford her the same cultural respect received by her (male) literary mentor W. H. Auden, whose self-consciously middlebrow, dilettante-ish work is often treated as serious mid-century cultural statement rather than as poetry without much to say. (Judith McDaniel, “‘Reconstituting the World’: The Poetry and Vision of Adrienne Rich,” in *Reading Adrienne Rich*, ed. Jane Roberta Cooper (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984.) Of course, this censure is not universal; some critics, most notably Helen Vendler, have praised Rich’s early work for its formal strengths and subtlety of feeling: “Four years after she published her first book, I read it in almost disbelieving wonder; someone my age was writing down my life.” (Helen Vendler, “Ghostlier Demarcations, Keener Sounds, in *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 299-300)

and messianic poetics is as present and discernible in her early work as it is in the more renowned output of her mid-career.

This sense of poetic and political continuity should not prove too surprising; Rich's expository writing demonstrates that her concerns with mythos and power began well before she was a known poet. In the Forward to her *Collected Early Poems*, Adrienne Rich describes her state of mind during her college years in the late 1940s, when "the death camps and the possibility of total human self-extinction through nuclear war" still loomed fresh over the nation and the world:

I had no political ideas of my own, only the era's vague and hallucinatory anti-Communism and the encroaching privatism of the 1950s. Drenched in invisible assumptions of my class and race, unable to fathom the pervasive ideology of gender, I felt "politics" as distant, vaguely sinister, the province of powerful older men or of people I saw as fanatics. It was in poetry that I sought a grasp on the world and on interior events, "ideas of order," even power. . . . I was like someone walking through a fogged-in city compelled on an errand she cannot describe, carrying maps she cannot use except in neighborhoods already familiar. . . .

(CEP, xx)

Some of these words—"I felt 'politics' as distant, vaguely sinister"—could astutely describe the pervasive idea of mythos that haunts Robert Lowell's work throughout his career. There are differences, of course—for instance, Lowell seldom identifies this sinister power as specifically male, since his privileged cultural position allows him to view masculinity as a default rather than as a qualifier—but the idea that the realm of the political is, or at least overlaps with, the realm of shady, threatening power relations marks Rich as a crucial player in the history of ethos vs. mythos in American poetry after modernism.

Specifically, Rich's poetry constructs a third possibility that differs significantly both from Berryman's attempt to revitalizing ethos and from Lowell's *idée fixe* of ethical helplessness in the face of ubiquitous and overwhelming ethos. In a move that distances her from her

predecessors, Rich forges an instrumental poetics whose purpose is to facilitate the triumph of ethos over the oppressions of mythos within the world of the poem, usually by confining mythos and power to an external space. This departure from the nuanced but ineffectual meditations of her peers and predecessors makes her a logical culmination for the tentative history of post-war, post-epic verse. We could even say that Rich constructs the ultimate comeback against Pound's brutal evisceration of ethos from the heart of the epic tradition, not only returning ethos to the epic dynamic (as Berryman did) but allowing it to roam free from the influence of mythos. As Nick Halpern puts it in *Everyday and Prophetic*, Rich's "sense of herself as a poet depends on her having given her voice an assignment above and beyond its own creation and elaboration. She actually has a prophetic mission."¹⁵⁰ We would do well to remember that Rich is writing in a century that still views the great classical epics as works that were supposed to do something, whether to tell "the tale of the tribe" or simply to lend a populace dignity and a sense of selfhood. Rich's "tribe" is humanity—sometimes a specifically female humanity, but never at the expense of the possibility of universalism—and her "tale" is a complex and deeply syntagmatic exposé of the woes and ills of mythos and power. This is not to say that Rich somehow recovers some true, authentic spirit of epic poetry, even if there ever was such a thing. But the conspicuous manner in which poems such as "Diving into the Wreck" thematize the struggle between ethos and mythos marks these works as part of the epic tradition even as they try to break free of it, attempting a revolution in verse against the subjugating tales and truisms of the culture as a whole, including the (male-dominated and mythos-tolerant) literary culture whose dynamics she challenges from within.

¹⁵⁰ Nick Halpern, *Everyday and Prophetic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 184.

Rich herself explicates this problem of the poetic tradition's self-conscious helplessness with respect to the accumulated power of mythos in her essay "When We Dead Awaken." It is worth quoting in full the following passage:

To the eye of a feminist, the work of Western male poets now writing reveals a deep, fatalistic pessimism as to the possibility of change, whether societal or personal, along with a familiar and threadbare use of women (and nature) as redemptive on the one hand, threatening on the other; and a new tide of phallocentric sadism and overt woman-hating which matches the sexual brutality of recent films. "Political" poetry by men remains stranded amid the struggles for power among male groups; in condemning U.S. imperialism or the Chilean junta the poet can claim to speak for the oppressed while remaining, as male, part of a system of sexual oppression. The enemy is always outside the self, the struggle somewhere else.¹⁵¹

Rich could almost be describing Lowell's Notebook when she speaks of the "struggles for power among male groups"—after all, this was quite literally the root of the chaos at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. As we have seen, Lowell does have the perspicacity to perceive those struggles as (at least on some level) futile; however, Rich is correct in perceiving that Lowell's poetry, as well as that of his contemporaries, seldom offers any actual hope or impetus for change.¹⁵² "Fatalistic pessimism" was so pervasive an aspect of the highbrow culture of the postwar male American literary establishment, both in poetry and in prose, that we might easily view it as an essential locus of the mythos that Rich's poetry pushes against. To put it another way, Rich's verse, especially her groundbreaking work of the mid-1970s, launches a direct attack not only against the traditional myths of Western civilization, but also against the

¹⁵¹ Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 49.

¹⁵² A crucial exception, perhaps, is the vatic political mode of Ginsberg and some of his Beat contemporaries, though of course that particular breed of male-dominated radicalism raises a whole additional set of problems involving gender and equality too numerous and complex to explore here.

newer myths established and perpetuated by her (mostly male) contemporaries in the course of their own complex confrontations with mythos. This conflation of contemporary culture and the historical milieu that forms the backdrop to that contemporary world grants Rich's work both timelessness and complexity while still allowing it to interact meaningfully with its own temporal moment.

Too often, the anti-mythic, messianic tendency in Rich's poetics—perhaps her greatest contribution to late 20th-century verse—is attributed only to her work of the late 1960s and the 1970s (*Leaflets*, *The Will to Change*, *Diving into the Wreck*, *Dream of a Common Language*), suggesting that her previous work, especially *A Change of World* and *The Diamond Cutters*, is merely a prelude to the socio-political gravitas of her mature output. This view is certainly not without foundation—it is consistent with the way Rich self-mythologized the development of her canon and her style away from the centripetal pull of Auden and other politically aware but myopically privileged mid-century male poets, beginning with the desire not to emulate the voices of literary authority and culminating in the creation of a voice entirely her own and self-consciously antithetical to the vogue of her apprentice years. But to accept this caesura in Rich's poetic career without suspicion is to ignore the deeper continuity of her socio-political concerns that proceeds without interruption from her earliest work onward. The idea that mythos is a beastly yet not insurmountable force separates Rich's work both from the dire, embattled worldview of a Lowell or a Berryman and also from the more playful yet perpetually vague transcendence offered by an O'Hara or a Millay. This chapter will trace the evolution of this idea—that the poetic imagination can disarm, dismantle, and overcome mythos rather than simply bearing witness to its monstrous force—from Rich's early neo-formalist lyrics through the culmination of her later style in the more overtly political works of the mid-to-late-Seventies,

especially the explicitly anti-mythopoeic “Diving into the Wreck.” In doing so, we will see how her desire to offer the reader an enactment of the triumph of ethos over mythos is a career-long project whose roots reach down even into the early works that Rich herself disowned as derivative, inauthentic, and implicitly antagonistic to the development of a genuine and self-actualized poetics.

Rich ends the opening section of *Leaflets* (1969), the first of her overtly political books,¹⁵³ with a slim, striking lyric that is at once one of her most hopeful and most apocalyptic poems. “Abnegation” is the story of a fox, but it is also a non-story: foxes don’t make stories; people do, and foxes are not people (probably for the best). Significantly, people also make fox stories, and these are stories for people, not foxes:

what does she want
with the dreams of dead vixens,
the apotheosis of Reynard,
the literature of fox-hunting?

(L, 313)

Of course the fox here is woman, gesturing toward some inter-species solidarity that is not quite metaphor but is still vaguely symbolic. Taken in this light, these tales are the tales of men in the sexual (and political) sense of the word: the vaguely Pre-Raphaelite aestheticization of

¹⁵³ Of course, there is no truly apolitical phase in Rich’s oeuvre. “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” from *A Change of World* (1951), is one of Rich’s most political poems, and her early volumes are consistently political in the sense that they engage with the dialectic between the individual and the world, particularly the oppressed/suppressed/repressed individual in the hegemonic world—and as this dissertation chapter argues, that is the omnipresent hallmark of her political, anti-epic, anti-rhetorical stance. But in *Leaflets* she begins to forge a change of tone from the sometimes-concealed polemics of “traditional” lyric to often-overt engagements with external (though never impersonal) political realities: the Vietnam War, the Holocaust, sexual politics, physical/systemic violence against women, etc. So not more political than her early work, but political in the more immediately recognizable sense of the word: concerning the polis itself in addition to the woman within the polis.

femininity in “the dreams of dead vixens,”¹⁵⁴ the masculine-trickster archetype of Reynard the Fox, and the undisguised and highly gendered brutality of fox hunting, an image so close to rape that it matters very little whether their relation is metaphorical or merely associative. But these are also the tales of “men” in the obsolete Anglo-Saxon sense of the word as well: stories of aestheticized women, exclusively masculine political struggles, and brutal acts of male aggression form the backbone of the Western literary tradition. Helen never “launch’d a thousand ships.” Helen would have gladly stayed home. But the idea of Helen, her transformation from woman to phantasm—a violent act of aesthetic idealization that robs her of her agency, her selfhood, her ethos—reduces her to the state of a “dead vixen” as the violent tides of male cunning and male violence, Reynard and his hunters in unspoken collusion, bring Troy crashing down around her.¹⁵⁵

But the fox is also inhuman in a way that resists and transcends the reader’s inclination to anthropomorphize her. The poem draws a sharp contrast between the world of the human speaker and the world of the fox:

I go down along the road
to a house nailed together by Scottish
Covenanters, instinct mortified
in a virgin forest,
and she springs toward her den
every hair on her pelt alive
with tidings of the immaculate present.

¹⁵⁴ Objective and subjective genitive. The ambiguity is intriguing: are these dead vixens dreaming from beyond the grave, perhaps like the ghost of Cathy in the early chapters of *Wuthering Heights*, or are the dead vixens the objects of others’ dreams, existing only as phantasms in the minds of the living? Both possibilities are male fantasies that marginalize the subjectivity of the female, and the brilliance of the phrase lies in the way it blurs the line between them. Ghosts are not agents if they exist to fulfill the desires of the living.

¹⁵⁵ The ancients disagree on what happened to Helen after the war, but none of them imagined anything nice.

The essential difference here is between the “mortified” instinct of self-censoring humanity and the profound corporeal sensitivity of the fox, whose pelt acts not only as a locus of physical sensation but as a site onto which the entire phenomenological range of sentient experience is focused.¹⁵⁶ The “immaculate present,” an unqualified and limitless gestalt, is one of three competing conceptions of purity in these lines, and the only one that the reader is clearly invited to believe in. “Instinct mortified” connotes everything that is uniquely and oppressively human in the poem; the Scottish Covenanters are a force of tectonic destruction in the otherwise felicitously inhuman landscape. Moreover, they carry the threat of ancestry, history, religion, politics, and tribalism, all human ills that have far more in common with “the literature of fox-hunting” than with the fox herself. The “virgin forest” offers a more tolerable ideal, though the distinction of virginity carries with it the threat of human defilement: the forest’s uncut state is an exception to a rule of general destruction rather than the natural state of forests. “Immaculate present,” on the other hand, both subsumes and overcomes the two preceding false purities. Importantly, the reader does not have access to the “tidings” that the fox feels¹⁵⁷—not only is the

¹⁵⁶ But note also the threat of violence contained in “pelt,” a word associated with killing, skinning, and haberdashery. The fox’s keenly inhuman faculties here intersect with humanity’s proclivity to destroy her.

¹⁵⁷ Yet in the implied camaraderie between speaker, reader, and fox, we can glimpse something of the dynamics of literary magic that are characteristic of the world of pre-epic story, the tales and myths that epic binds together and asserts control over. Jeremy M. Downes has associated this sort of magical writing specifically, though not definitively, with the underrepresented history of epic by female writers: “I should not be taken as saying that all strange texts, all books of lyrics, all novels by women should be considered epics; but I am saying that women’s experimental magic with genre, taken with our stultified notions of ‘epic,’ can sometimes conceal a broader set of epic goals, an epic ambition that dare not speak its name, or a powerful—and epic—critique of epic.” Though Rich is largely absent from Downes’s study except as a commentator, the magical implications of her fox in “Abnegation” position her neatly

word itself messianic, transcendent, but it is difficult to sort out exactly what might be immaculate about this world where history, religion, architecture, and threats of violence mar the purity of the landscape.

We might also view the “house nailed together by Scottish Covenanters” as a sort of prefabricated ruin that the poem constructs on site in order to take leave of it. At the level of literal reality, it is difficult for the reader to conceive of the house as anything but a nice place, yet the poem constructs it as representative of a milieu from which the speaker longs to be abject. This treatment of a theoretically habitable location as always already destroyed is, as we will continue to see in poems such as “Storm Warnings” and “Diving into the Wreck,” one of the most consistent and fundamental gestures in Rich’s poetics, and one of the main mechanisms through which she transforms the idea of epic and gestures toward a post-epic world in which the threat of mythos is defused, the polis is irrelevant, and the subjective agency of ethos or character may live as liberated an existence as the dancing vixen.

Therefore, the irredeemable, fallen state of the poem’s human milieu is exactly the point of this passage, which casts the fox not as a locus of unstained purity, but rather as an agent who can transcend the damage done by mythos and the human world. In radical contrast to the “apotheosis of Reynard,” the unnamed vixen of the poem enacts an ascension that is uniquely her own. Apotheosis is both passive and subsuming, an elevation of the subject to an exalted state by external, mythopoeic forces. The motion of the vixen as she “springs toward her den,” on the other hand, is lateral rather than vertical: anti-hierarchical, a deliberate stepping-aside from destructive irrelevance rather than a nonconsensual elevation to a position that exists only in relation to the structures that it attempts to leave behind. The gesture is twice antithetical to

within this aspect of the tradition that Downes is attempting to outline. (Jeremy M. Downes, *The Female Homer* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2010), 63)

“apotheosis,” lacking both the sense of distance implied by “apo-” and also, of course, the false mythic grandeur of “-theosis,” of becoming a god. The vixen’s world is a world without gods, and her motion is that of escape by the shortest possible path, a spry and effortless “spring[ing]” that requires no literary, rhetorical, or mythical apparatus.

The meaning of “abnegation” in the poem’s title only begins to come in focus in the final lines of the poem, as the human speaker gives parallel accounts of what she (the speaker) has and what the fox does not have. The irony here, which the reader is encouraged to read back into the title, is that no one is really abnegating or surrendering anything at all: the fox has nothing to abnegate, while the human only gestures toward a possible surrender of her unhappy inheritance:

They left me a westernness,
a birthright, a redstained, ravelled
afghan of sky.
She has no archives,
no heirlooms, no future
except death [. . .]

The bloody imagery of the speaker’s “inheritance,” public in its brutality and domestic in its instantiation, takes the gesture of potential violence that has been haunting the poem and makes it external, physical, and perfective: the image of the “redstained, ravelled / afghan” implies not only that violence has already occurred, but also that comfort and rest (represented by the blanket) have been disrupted and nullified. Moreover, the aftermath of violence, and implicitly the violence itself, acts as a commodity within the human logic of the poem, a locus of sadistic but tangible value that is handed down from generation to generation. Inheritance is a unique form of commodity distribution insofar as it occurs without exchange and to some extent without consent; the bloody inheritance descends on the speaker from above (note the implicit prior apotheosis of the human ancestors), locating itself in the sky (locus of mythic patriarchal authority). In contrast, the fox possesses nothing, a situation that differs significantly from one in

which the fox merely does not possess the things that the human speaker does. Her nothingness is her capital; “no archives, / no heirlooms, no future” is a concise definition of a world-without-mythos, an experiential way of being that predicates itself on a phenomenological world without paratext, interpretation, or narrative.¹⁵⁸ Even the “death” that lies in her future acts as a symbolic contradiction to the unwelcome process of human inheritance that haunts the speaker; the focus on death itself as the terminus of life completely reverses the faux-eternity of the Scottish Covenanters, their well-built houses, and the lineage of humanity which they represent in the poem. In the world of the fox, death is final: nothing is passed on, just as nothing was received.

Yet even this intimation of a release from life is not the “abnegation” that the title of the poem promises. To give something up, one first must have it, yet all the fox has is a collection of nothings. The lack of a thing—“no archives, no heirlooms”—cannot be surrendered even in death. Nor does the human speaker make any motions toward surrendering her own inheritance, uncomfortable and alienated though it may make her. In fact the poem turns in its final lines back toward the unwelcome ancestors, as though they are a nervous thought that the speaker cannot quite shake:

and I could be more
her sister than theirs
who chopped their way across these hills
—a chosen people.

A grim sort of irony lurks in the weighty phrase that ends the poem, “a chosen people,” which quietly drags in even more of the baggage of Western culture, specifically religious resonances from Jewish and Christian traditions that expose the wide background lingering behind the poem’s previous references to Reynard and the “literature of fox-hunting”—that is, the speaker’s

¹⁵⁸ These three categories are all acutely present in the human world of the poem, collapsing to a singularity in the image of the Scottish covenanters who simultaneously function as a gloss on the present, an provision of cultural context, and an origin story.

inheritance is itself an inheritance, and the reader can easily believe that the chain of inheritance cascades inconceivably far into the past. Mythos becomes an atemporal construct, violently occupying the summation of the past. The weight of the threat it poses is as great as anything from Robert Lowell's paranoid corpus, as insurmountable as IS or the fatal summation of "the whaleroad and the whale."

If this were the thematic as well as the linear endpoint of the poem, we might be tempted to read Rich as a poet every bit as cowed by mythos as Lowell was. But the poem's unproductive return to the mired state of the speaker is, in fact, a powerful clue that the gesture is a false-hearted one, a momentary distraction from the effulgent freedom of the vixen rather than a surrender to the forces of mythos. After the speaker's declaration that "I could be more / her sister than theirs," the return of the Covenanters (the ancestors, the humans) feels more empty than triumphant. The poem's emergent message is not coterminous with its physical ending; therefore, fittingly, the "abnegation" that the poem ultimately enacts is not the conclusion of a linear narrative—which would be an insincere capitulation to the world of Reynard, literature, and myth—but rather the poem's refusal to let its own ending matter. The speaker has glimpsed the liberated world of the fox; the speaker remains within the bondage of human mythos; yet the way in which the two spheres interact suggests a liminal place that is governed neither by mythos nor by the victorious defeat of mythos by ethos. The poem abnegates the struggle itself, offering a glimpse of a post-epic poetics that is not even governed by the struggle against the nonconsensual inheritance of the human race.

The tension in "Abnegation," then, is not between mythos and ethos, but rather between a world that has not yet overcome the struggle against ethos and a world that already has. This second world, the one that has not only triumphed but has also set aside the struggle itself, is the

one toward which Rich's poetics routinely yearns. In this sense, we can read "Abnegation" as a sort of post-epic *ars poetica*, or a deliberately understated manifesto describing the essential social and political mission of Rich's poetry. These are not poems that want merely to show us scenes from the war; they are poems that assume the war as a premise, then show us the possibilities of peace. Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, this gesture places Rich's work closer to Virgil's than to Lowell's or Berryman's in one crucial way: her oeuvre, like the classical epic, orients itself toward an endpoint. Rich's post-epic, egalitarian humanism is just as much of a telos as the founding of Rome in the *Aeneid*, although while Virgil's great event is conservative,¹⁵⁹ essentializing,¹⁶⁰ and patriarchal,¹⁶¹ Rich's is revolutionary, heterogeneous, and anti-authoritarian.

It goes without saying that these gestures lie at the heart of Rich's corpus and provide the underpinning of most of her expository prose. However, the remainder of this chapter will show that these gestures also consistently define the poetics employed not only in the better known middle phase of her career, but also in the earlier work that even the poet herself more or less denounced as juvenile, imitative, and insincere.

Rich's first volume, *A Change of World*, famously won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award in 1951. The prize established her early on as a master of the deliberately middlebrow post-war formal style associated with W. H. Auden and his younger acolytes, inciting an avalanche of praise which the young poet would spend at least a decade digging herself out from under. Nevertheless, this early work is already driven by the anti-mythic tendencies that come

¹⁵⁹ As it justifies and naturalizes the status quo.

¹⁶⁰ As it defines the origins and characteristics of Romanness.

¹⁶¹ Literally.

into full bloom in later poems such as “Abnegation.” By reading Rich this way, we can fight against the traditional narrative of her career as divided into a less and a more genuine phase; moreover, we can demonstrate that even the young Rich was a poet of profound and original social importance who deserves to be considered, read, and regarded alongside her contemporary post-war peers rather than as a writer who only came into her own in the 1960s.

A Change of World opens with what on the surface appears to be one of Rich’s most self-consciously Auden-esque lyrics, “Storm Warnings,” which explores the limits of instrumental measurements against the vague and subtle threats offered by a quietly hostile world. As we will see, though, “Storm Warnings,” not unlike “Abnegation,” uses nuances of its own poetics to remove itself from the very dynamics of power and mythos that it constructs.¹⁶² Again, this is a poem that carefully constructs a ruin before abandoning it: the coldly comforting house, the shattered instruments, even the ultimately impotent threat of the storm should remind us of the “house nailed together by Scottish Covenanters” in “Abnegation,” a spiritually uninhabitable product of the poetic imagination that is created in order to be left behind. Even more poignantly, the milieu of “Storm Warnings” resembles the function of Rich’s most famous ruin, in “Diving into the Wreck,” which we will turn to shortly.

Though not an outright homage, “Storm Warnings” has unmistakable epistemological roots in Auden’s “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” (1939):

He disappeared in the dead of winter:
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
And snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.

¹⁶² Yet “Storm Warnings” is often misread, or at least under-read, as being primarily about the uncomplicated (though not necessarily easy) protection of the domestic sphere: Nick Halpern’s comment, “The poem ‘Storm Warnings’ had been about keeping the storm out of the house,” is typical of the dismissive attitude taken toward this nuanced lyric. (Halpern, 198)

What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.¹⁶³

Auden's "instruments" reappear in the opening lines of "Storm Warnings," transformed from failed cultural arbiters to innocuous but inadequate harbingers of danger:

The glass has been falling all the afternoon,
And knowing better than the instrument
What winds are walking overhead, what zone
Of gray unrest is moving across the land,
I leave the book upon a pillowed chair
And walk from window to closed window, watching
Boughs strain against the sky [. . .]

(CW, 3)

Everything about these lines is overtly anti-catastrophic. The familiar resignation in the verb tense of "has been falling" suggests an intimate, quotidian threat, in many ways the opposite of the one-time, world-changing death of a great poet that Auden's poem explores. The "zone / Of gray unrest" that is "moving across the land" does nudge the poem's diction toward a broader awareness of a world beyond the speaker's psyche, but Rich situates the line as a half-hearted or unsuccessful revision of the previous, more evocative image, "What winds are walking overhead." The central threat in the poem—which in this first stanza has not yet progressed beyond a foul weather front with vague metaphorical potential—isn't so sinister a thing that it can't be imagined performing an act as innocent as "walking." We are almost reminded of Carl Sandberg's "Fog" (1916) that "comes / on little cat feet," although the feigned gravitas of "gray unrest," coupled with the dark urgency of the poem's title, does not allow us the luxurious simplicity that Sandberg offers. Already the tension between lines 3 and 4 promises a sustained ambiguity of tone that is unlikely either to break into outright storm or to clear into a felicitous

¹⁶³ W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," in *Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1979), 80-83.

resolution. The domestic comforts of the “book upon a pillowed chair,” as well as the willful self-preservation of the “closed window” and the boughs that “strain against the sky,” reenact this tension at close range, juxtaposing images instead of tonal registers. The overall product is an opening stanza that stubbornly—frustratingly, perhaps—refuses to take sides in a struggle it doesn’t quite describe.

The logic behind this early equivocation does not emerge until the poem’s final moment, which provides a tidy fulfillment and a satisfying payoff to the irksome uncertainty of a voice that adopts Auden’s rhetoric while refusing to ape his convictions:

I draw the curtains as the sky goes black
And set a match to candles sheathed in glass
Against the keyhole draught, the insistent whine
Of weather through the unsealed aperture.
This is our sole defense against the season;
These are the things that we have learned to do
Who live in troubled regions.

The brilliance of these final lines lies in their ironically salvific anti-messianism. The impossibility of reconciling contradictions in tone, we learn, was the point of the scene all along. The threat isn’t much—just the innocuous chill of a “keyhole draft”—but the defense isn’t much either: the slight and delicate light of “candles sheathed in glass.” “This is our sole defense against the season,” the speaker tells the reader in a tone that is neither comforting nor hopeless. Despite its affinities with Auden’s elegy for Yeats, “Storm Warnings” does not construct a universe of binary oppositions: evil and good, sin and redemption, inclement and fair weather. Rather, the poem presents a world in which threats are constant and minor, and defenses are simple yet never quite secure. “The things we have learned to do” gestures toward the subtle efficacy of the private sphere rather than the ostentatious heroism of the public, and toward a sort of self-educated human wile that emanates from within the individual rather than being proffered

by an external, hierarchical agent (such as Yeats, or Auden). Threat and defense alike are presented as fundamentally anarchic. The poem does not bear witness to mythos and its opposition, as a similar poem might were it by Lowell (think of how much more sinister his storms and warnings would be than Rich's). Rather, the poem, not unlike "Abnegation," is constructing a sphere of experience that deliberately, methodically, and effectively removes itself from the threat that mythos might otherwise pose.

Elsewhere, the surface of the poem seems to belie this anti-mythic gesture. In its most Audenesque moments, the text maintains, through a sort of gnomic certitude, that the storm will come, that the enormous threat from the outside world will descend and consume us. The second stanza ends:

Weather abroad
And weather in the heart alike come on
Regardless of prediction.

And in the third:

. . . the wind will rise,
We can only close the shutters.

Yet the anti-binary framework of the poem is enough to assure us that these adages are not as uncomplicated as the voice that speaks them might lead us to believe. They are mere feints, much like the glimpses of oppressive civilization embodied in the Scottish Covenanters and ancestral builders that trouble the natural world in "Abnegation." Even within the middle stanzas, though, a countercurrent of ambiguity quietly invites the reader to doubt the certitude toward which the stanzas' endings attempt to gesture. The second stanza begins with a strange and complicating image that casts time, rather than weather, as the intrusive element in the poem:

And think again, as often when the air
Moves inward toward a silent core of waiting,
How with a single purpose time has traveled
By secret currents of the undiscerned
Into this polar realm.

Dreamy and free-associative though they may seem on the surface,¹⁶⁴ these lines in fact subvert and displace the ostensible threat of the storm by exposing a more fundamental agent, time, which lies behind the coming of the storm—and an additional, even more fundamental agent or medium, the “secret currents of the undiscerned,” through which time itself has had to travel. The ultimate source of danger in the poem is not even a thing that the poem is capable of showing us. The “undiscerned” here seems to overlap with the ineffable, and the poem itself is therefore failing to perform the basic functions of poetry: witnessing and expressing. If the fundamentally threatening agent in the poem is a thing that the poem cannot even conceive, then the poem has chosen to exist outside the realm of its essential conflict. “Time” and the “undiscerned” are roughly equivalent to the lore of foxhunting and legends of Reynard in “Abnegation”—they compose a stratum of human experience with which the poem has chosen not to engage in spite of its surface preoccupation with the poise and counterpoise of storm and safety.

This gesture might remind us of Herod and Christ in Lowell’s “The Holy Innocents,” both of whom are ultimately embattled by the overwhelming and inescapable threat posed by mythos, by “the world,” in spite of their apparent opposition within the *mise en scene* of the poem itself. However, a drastic difference in tone between the two poems—as, indeed, between the two poets—demonstrates that Rich’s purpose in removing her lyric from this underlying arch-threat is fundamentally different from Lowell’s. Lowell’s work serves as a profound and

¹⁶⁴ Or perhaps even concealing a shameless pun on Latin *tempus*?

troubling warning against the ubiquitous and invincible threat of mythos, deliberately drawing the ineffable toward the foreground, even if only along some asymptotic course that allows it never quite to appear. Rich's poetry, on the other hand, here and elsewhere posits the existence of a fundamental, non-binary threat acting as a thing from which poetry, and therefore human experience, might actually be able to turn aside.

This draws our attention to an even more essential difference between Lowell's worldview and Rich's: while Lowell writes from a background of American Puritanism and apocalyptic prophecy, which takes the idea of absolute power as an axiom, Rich approaches the dynamic of ethos and mythos from a secular, postmodern, leftist, feminist point of view that conceives of power as a thing that is wielded by human agents to whom it was arbitrarily distributed by the coincidental forces of history.¹⁶⁵ This means that mythos, in Rich's world, perpetuates itself: the discourses surrounding power are a necessary condition of power itself. Humanity's power over foxes is predicated on the literature of foxhunting, which we may choose to unread, just as the threat of the storm is predicated on Time and the undiscerned, which we

¹⁶⁵ It is worth noting here that Rich's work conceives of power in two apparently contradictory ways. The first is a traditional understanding of power as a thing wielded by some individuals and exerted over others, while the second is an understanding of power as an impersonal network of relations with no particular locus, agent, or patient, a version of the view most often associated with Michel Foucault. However, we should not see these competing paradigms as contradictory; rather, Rich's work understands that while power is fundamentally systemic, it is also the case that certain individuals reap the benefits of the impersonal network, while others are neglected, abused, oppressed, and marginalized by it. Susan Bordo says it perfectly in her critique of Foucault: "I would also argue (not all feminists would agree) that this 'impersonal' conception of power does not entail that there are no dominant positions, social structures or ideologies emerging from the play of forces; the fact that power is not held by anyone does not entail that it is equally held by all. It is 'held' by no one; but people and groups are positioned differently within it." (Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Foucault and the Politics of the Body," in *Up Against Foucault*, ed. Caroline Ramazanoglu (London: Routledge, 1993), 191)

may dismiss as ineffable. It is this gesture of turning aside from the discourses of power that allows Rich's poetry to offer the reader hope for deliverance from the power of mythos.

Yet the real philosophical heart of "Storm Warnings" is its third stanza, the one that ends with the feigned fatalism of "the wind will rise, / We can only close the shutters." The stanza is worth reproducing in full here, if only so that we may experience again, before proceeding, exactly how carefully and quietly the first five-and-a-half lines deflate the final adage if we read carefully:

Between foreseeing and averting change
Lies all the mastery of elements
Which clocks and weatherglasses cannot alter.
Time in the hand is not control of time,
Nor shattered fragments of an instrument
A proof against the wind; the wind will rise,
We can only close the shutters.

At a first glance, these lines seem to be casting the human agent as disempowered—we cannot control time or weather; even our instruments, which the speaker claimed to know better than in the poem's opening lines, are shattered and insufficient protection. We have no control, no defense. (Note how quietly "I" has turned to "we.") But the language of the third stanza is troubled in a way that suggests that all might not be as it seems within the expected story of embattled-individual-versus-threatening-world. The phrase "mastery of elements" embraces a crucial grammatical ambiguity, objective and subjective genitive: does the phrase point to the human agent's mastery over the elements, or the mastery that the elements exert over the human agent? The implications here are profound: if we read the phrase in the latter, subjective sense, then the power that the elements exert lies in wait like a dangerous animal in tall grass, ready to ambush anyone who might try "averting change." If we read it in the former, objective sense, however, then there is such a thing as mastery over the elements, and it is so bold and potent a

force that even “clocks and weatherglasses cannot alter” it. Again, as in stanza two, we catch a glimpse of the power that lies behind power; only this time, the poem implies that the human agent might meaningfully interact with or even wield this fundamental force.

The following image, “Time in the hand,” goes a step further by shaking the very dynamics of power on which the poem has been built from the start. “Time,” as we remember from stanza two, is an important component of the implicit set of forces that lurk behind the explicit force of the storm, a gesture in the direction of an ineffable and embattling mythos; however, here in the third stanza it is a thing that the speaker can imagine holding in the hand, a gesture that gently asserts both control and possession but without threat or struggle, as in the quiet proverb about “a bird in the hand” being better than “two in the bush.”¹⁶⁶ But rather than stopping there and allowing us to envision a speaker who may, like a successful epic hero, master and overcome the threats posed by transcendent elements of the external world, the poem goes on to emphasize the insufficiency of this slight gesture of control: “Time in the hand is not control of time”; the gentle gesture of possession, is not, in fact, power. In fact, the way we see time and the human speaker interact in this stanza has very little to do with power at all, except insofar as the poem tells us that the two are unrelated. What the poem makes us witness is, again, an act of abnegation, a statement about power that willfully removes itself from the struggle-with-power rather than either resisting or surrendering.

In these two poems from two very different stages of Rich’s career—“Abnegation” from *Leaflets* (1969) and “Storm Warnings” from *A Change of World* (1951)—we have seen Rich’s

¹⁶⁶ Of course, the unstated backdrop to this proverb is the world of bird-hunting, which, when considered literally, does imply several kinds of violence and power—but I still think it is accurate to say that the tone of the saying is generally one that urges quiet contentment rather than focusing on the hunt, the weaponry, the killing, or, in Rich’s words, “the literature of fox-hunting.”

explicit concern with mythos-as-power (the “literature of fox-hunting” and the “apotheosis of Reynard”), as well as Rich’s intimately related, though more understated and elemental, concern with power-as-mythos, as embodied by the weather and its network of collusive forces in “Storm Warnings.” Yet each poem also offers a way out from the clutches of mythos, by demonstrating the ultimate inadequacy of the binary model of agent/patient, master/servant, or mythos/ethos; in both works, the poetic imagination escapes or at least finds shelter from the bounds of power and mythos by manipulating the conceptual spaces in which power relations occur so that there exists a separate space outside of the field of power’s presumptuous immanence. In “Abnegation,” this takes the form of the imagined fox-space, a space removed from “house,” “westernness,” “archives,” and even the brutal humanistic purity of “virgin forest.” In “Storm Warnings,” the speaker creates a domestic realm that does not provide shelter from the storm but ultimately does not have to, because the poetic imagination deepens and distances the seat of power-as-mythos until it is too remote to pose a serious threat to the speaker, who, ironically, removes herself from the threat of power by recognizing and meditating upon its seemingly insurmountable vastness.

This productive and ultimately optimistic act of playing with power’s scope and location becomes the fundamental gesture of one of the most well-known and definitive poems of Rich’s oeuvre, “Diving into the Wreck” (from *Diving into the Wreck*, 1973). This poem sees Rich at the peak of her mid-1970s political self-consciousness, yet it explicitly echoes the quietly messianic gesture of escape-from-mythos that, as we have seen, was already one of Rich’s driving concerns from the earliest stages of her career, as well as the definitive feature of her relationship with the residue of epic in the western world. Yet “Diving into the Wreck” also furthers this gesture by imagining a literal space, the sea, which allows the poet to explore the relationship between mythos/power, ethos/character, and conceptual space within a literal medium that is ripe with

metaphorical potential, while at the same time resisting the collusive forces of metaphor, poetics, fiction, mythos, and power by creating a profound, powerful, and literally present alternative in the vast and unknowable space of the ocean.

More than the other poems that we have examined, “Diving into the Wreck” acts as a sort of anti-epic in miniature, not only resisting the forces of mythos but also mimicking some of the formal gestures of traditional epic in a way that makes the dark history of the genre more present even as the poem struggles to undermine it. The poem frames itself as a sort of hero’s quest: the speaker and main actor in the narrative is conspicuously solitary (“I am having to do this / not like Cousteau with his / assiduous team / aboard the sun-flooded schooner / but here alone”); she has quasi-magical instruments to assist her (“the camera,” “the knife-blade,” “the ladder”); and she has inherited wisdom (however ironically) that may or may not help her (“First having read the book of myths...”). Most importantly, the speaker is conscious of a teleological drive behind her actions, a purpose that is as all-consuming as Aeneas’s drive to found a city or Odysseus’s to return to Ithaca: we feel as much as see this in statements such as “I am having to do this,” “We know what it [the ladder] is for,” “I go down,” “I go down,” “I came to explore the wreck,” and “this is the place.”

The speaker’s voice is clear in the existence of its intention even when it is hazy on the particulars, in moments of near-doubt such as “it is easy to forget / what I came for / among so many who have always lived here.” This is nothing more than the sort of episodic distraction that the epic hero must be subjected to, proportionally condensed into the framework of lyric. The journey downward, into the deep, might remind us of the underworld episodes in both the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, though in many ways (as we will see) the ocean and the wreck in Rich’s poem are far more ambiguous places than the underworlds of the ancients. Perhaps most

importantly, the poem invites us to read it in relation to the tradition of epic, beginning with the remarkably straightforward line “First having read the book of myths...” This single gesture of epic self-awareness not only aligns the poem with the remnants of the epic tradition, but also identifies the poem as something external and perhaps antithetical to the well-behaved epic: a speaker who is aware of the myths cannot participate in them without some degree of ironic distance, if not outright disdain. This, more than anything, suggests that the poem is consciously mocking the conventions of epic and the idea of the hero’s journey, co-opting its basic gestures in order to subvert it from within.

As for the poem’s engagement with mythos and power, the speaker also reveals this explicitly in one of the middle stanzas: “my mask is powerful / it pumps my blood with power / the sea is another story / the sea is not a question of power...” There is a note of distress in these three repetitions of “power” in such a short space. We have seen the nature and the presence of power are recurring themes in Rich’s oeuvre, but to evoke the name of power rather than just to enact and explore its structures is one of the poem’s more startling actions. The repetition here has a dangerously hypnotic effect, as the idea of power tries to infiltrate, fill, and occupy the mental space of the poem just as the oxygen from the tank infiltrates, fills, and occupies the body of the speaker. The metaphorical content of “it pumps my blood with power” attempts to literalize and contain this gesture, and the emergent effect—an external apparatus forcing power into the body of the speaker—is carefully designed to create discomfort in the reader by mimicking structures of rape and other forms of violence. Without presenting as an explicit polemic, the poem uses these lines to situate itself outside of power, just as the structural and rhetorical gestures of “Abnegation” and “Storm Warnings” did with their own psychic and political milieus. But “Diving into the Wreck” goes a step further by not only imagining a place

that is removed from power but also labeling it as such: “the sea is not a question of power.” When the speaker goes on to assert that “I have to learn alone / to turn my body without force / in the deep element,” the gesture is not one of helplessness but one of radical liberation: to be free from the “question of power” means not only not having to, but not even being able to rely on the instruments of force: the “knife-blade,” the “body-armor,” the “book of myths” all become equally ineffectual, as does, startlingly, the speaker’s usual ways of moving her own body. The poem’s revolt against power, then, does not confine itself to power as understood as an external force, but also implodes to eradicate the strongholds of power within the individual. In the poem’s rhetorical universe, the un-power of the sea has negated the power of the mask by the time we reach the end of the stanza. Mythos is defeated as the mythologized function of objects is peeled away, leaving a demythologized milieu, the sea, and a demythologized agent, the speaker. Thus the poem’s world becomes a tidy distillation of the essential gesture of abnegation that is present, albeit in a more complicated form, both in “Abnegation” and in “Storm Warnings.”

Ironically, though, the central quest of the poem is as much a drive to accrue as it is a drive to abnegate. The speaker “came to explore the wreck”—perhaps not to physically salvage artifacts¹⁶⁷ from the productively disillusioned, demythologized milieu of the shipwreck, but certainly to gather impressions and truths of the wreck’s nature:

the thing I came for:
the wreck itself and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun . . .

(DW, 162-164)

¹⁶⁷ After all, physical objects in the poem—knife, flippers, mask, ladder, book of myths—consistently represent the antithesis of the unmediated truth toward which the speaker is striving.

Even this desire for accrual involves a certain degree of abnegation, though, as we can clearly see in the pair of negative statements (not the story, not the myth). This is the source of much of the poem's ultimate hopefulness: by suggesting the existence of a thing outside of mythos, a thing that can be gathered and held onto even while mythos is refused and passed over, "Diving into the Wreck" hints at a post-epic humanistic positivism that we might think of as diametrically opposed to Lowell's nihilistic refusal to imagine a world without mythos. It is absolutely crucial that the poem allows "the wreck" to remain a generalized symbol of any number of human truths and realities; because the wreck is a sort of cipher, a blank waiting to be filled, the reader's attention drifts to the act of accrual itself rather than focusing solely on the thing being accrued. And yet the image of the "drowned face" stands in peculiar contrast to the implications of emptiness and uncertainty that the rest of this passage evokes. The dream-logic of the poem's imagery does not demand or even invite a reductive, rationalizing reading, though, so we are free to notice the delicacy and subtlety with which the focus on the wreck itself (and on the idea of "the thing itself") becomes a focus on the drowned face rather than merely shifting its gaze from one object to another, from wreck to face. This allows the drowned face both to inhabit and to become the wreck. The barrier between equation and differentiation, metaphor and metonymy, falls apart even as the drowned face's steady focus on the sun provides a contrary force of simple objective constancy, the uncomplicated relationship between the beholder and the beheld. What the poem accrues in these lines, then, is nothing less than the possibility that even the distinction between identity and disparity might be a false one. Consider the speaker in "Abnegation," who gestures toward identification with the fox yet must herself remain disparate from the fox in spite of the poem's emergent enactment of the sort of abnegation that might allow the two to become one. "Diving into the Wreck" constructs an ontological model that annihilates this dilemma by

making it irrelevant, just as both “Abnegation” and “Storm Warnings” disempower mythos by constructing a space outside of it.

In its final stanzas, “Diving into the Wreck” adopts an anti-mythic, messianic gesture of a sort we have not yet seen, in Rich’s work or elsewhere: the speaker adopts a universal persona, thus gesturing toward the triumphant ascension of ethos not merely over mythos, but in a world without it. Mere milieu, which is impossible to separate entirely from the idea of mythos, is set aside to make way for character, subjectivity, and universal androgynous personhood:

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
steams black, the merman in his armored body
We circle endlessly
about the wreck
we dive into the hold.
I am she: I am he

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes . . .

There is plenty to say about these lines even on a formal level. The peculiarities of punctuation and capitalization, particularly the lack of a period between “his armored body” and “We,” suggest a blurring of things that otherwise might be considered separate. The shortened lines toward the end of the stanza accelerate the pace of the verse just enough to suggest exactly the sort of endless circling that the lines describe. And the odd colon between “I am she” and “I am he” both unites the apparent dichotomy of genders while also maintaining something of the asymmetry of implication: the speaker’s identity precedes and therefore contains her ability to be someone else as well. The poem’s universalism, then, is not the easy universalism that arises from the effacement of individual identity, but the more difficult and ultimately more productive universalism that arises from an individual’s deliberate assumption of the mantle of the other. Again the reader is faced with the paradoxical twinning of accrual and abnegation, only this time

the abnegation of selfhood itself is the thing being abnegated, while the thing accrued is no less a treasure than the possibility of a pan-humanistic universalism that derives not from mythos, but from the necessarily fragmented, subjective, and incomplete experience of a single person. When the poem goes on to declare that “we are the half-destroyed instruments / that once held to a course,” the emphasis is not on the fallen state of the instruments themselves, but on their liberation from the necessity of use, purpose, and exterior meaning.

It is fitting that a poem that breaks down the barrier between metaphor and metonymy should begin its conclusion with this subtle critique of measurement—the ways in which we assign meaning, whether through language, through poetry, or through myth, are, in “Diving into the Wreck,” no more fixed than the future course suggested by a “fouled compass” or the past course recorded in a “water-eaten log.” This liberation from the need to pinpoint, to measure, and to navigate is what makes the poem not merely anti-mythic, but also messianic: in its very resistance to the totalizing, explanatory, and defining narrative of “the book of myths” (or “the literature of fox-hunting,” or any of the other instantiations of mythos in Rich’s oeuvre), “Diving into the Wreck” offers to change the world, not, like Pound, through telling the “tale of the tribe” or salvaging the fragments of what has been, but rather by deliberately and definitively abnegating the need for meanings, explanations, and the oppressive order offered by distinctions and divisions. Ethos can inhabit a space without mythos; “we,” “I,” and “you,” “he” and “she,” can collectively and individually explore a world that needs no explanation, no meta-narrative, in order to exist. The “book of myths / in which / our names do not appear” becomes the symbol of this liberation as certainly as it was the symbol of oppression in the poem’s opening lines: mythos still exists, but it has no power over us; it literally does not contain us.

As a final note, as a reader and critic who is generally skeptical of messianic tendencies in poetic, political, and cultural thought, I want to mention that we need not read the anti-mythic messianic tendency in Rich's verse as an attempt to alter the structure of the social world, for art to intrude into the realm of the actual. A poet who presents us with a way to move beyond the repressive bonds of mythos is not necessarily a poet who hopes to dismantle or efface mythos itself. Like Trotsky's permanent revolution, Rich's verse understands that its politics are predicated on opposition and that the isolated, though not necessarily isolationist, activity of poetry will never fulfill its own promise on its own. To dream of a common language requires Babel; to dive into the wreck, there must always be a wreck. If either were lost, the explicit as well as the implicit manifestos of Rich's verse would lose not only their context but their function as well. The vast and beautiful promises of Rich's poetics are ways of knowing, not ways of doing.

And yet, as we have seen, changing one's point of view, the arrangement of one's conceptual spaces, and even one's relationship to the basic structures of language is itself a profoundly efficacious act in Rich's world. Poetry does not have to urge extra-poetical action in order to be politically pragmatic. Form matters as much as semantics, gesture and worldview as much as meaning. We need not read Rich's verse as an attempt to alter the structure of the social world; and yet, we should. For Rich, writing is always "re-vision," an attempt to see the world in a fundamentally new way—and thereby to change it, since the "ways" of the world are largely coterminous with the ways we see it. Nowhere does Rich better summarize the potentially destructive power of a social milieu than in "Vesuvius at Home," her 1975 essay on Emily Dickinson:

Suppose Jonathan Edwards had been born a woman; suppose William James, for that matter, had been born a woman? (The invalid seclusion of his sister Alice is

suggestive.) Even from men, New England took its psychic toll; many of its geniuses seemed peculiar in one way or another, particularly along the lines of social intercourse. Hawthorne, until he married, took his meals in his bedroom, apart from the family. Thoreau insisted on the values both of solitude and of geographical restriction, boasting that “I have traveled much in Concord.” Emily Dickinson—viewed by her bemused contemporary Thomas Higginson as “partially cracked,” by the twentieth century as fey or pathological—has increasingly struck me as a practical woman, exercising her gift as she had to, making choices. I have come to imagine her as somehow too strong for her environment, a figure of powerful will, not at all frail or breathless, someone whose personal dimensions would be felt in a household.¹⁶⁸

The liberated state that Rich imagines Dickinson occupying stands in startling contrast to the oppressive, impersonal, mythic milieu of New England, a force that Rich here presents as every bit as oppressive and inexorable as Lowell’s terrifying “IS.” Yet for Rich, as for Dickinson—as for us, if we listen—writing, reading, and the reimagining of social structures and power dynamics is itself a revolutionary act with pragmatic implications. Not only can liberation from mythos occur, but it can occur through the medium of poetry, which exists not in a separate, “pure” artistic space (a conception as alien and unreal as the “virgin forest” in “Abnegation”), but in direct and constant dialogue with social and political realities. Rich’s oeuvre insists on the possibility not only of recovering ethos from the Modernist manifestations of epic that sought to exclude it from the poetic tradition, but also of forging a meaningful, adaptable, and lasting poetics in which ethos is liberated from the forces of mythos that oppressed, subjugated, and embattled it since the dawn of western literature.

¹⁶⁸ Adrienne Rich, “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson,” in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 160.

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